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MANY HAPPY RETURNS
Your rights at Christmas

AIR CONDITIONERS
Let us take the heat out of this summer

TESTS
- Washing machines
- Thermomix TM5
- Tablets
- Cameras
- Bissell Vac & Steam
- Microwaves
- Lawnmowers
- Batteries

FAT CHANCE!
The biggest fat myths busted

HIT THE ROAD
Navigating the world of travel insurance

Competing interests

Why consumers should be at the heart of reforms

When the federal government was elected, I wrote that its Competition Policy Review would be one of the most important of its kind for consumers of the next decade. Now that the draft report of the review has been released, it looks like that prediction may prove to be correct.

It's probably fair to say that competition policy has a bad name in the minds of many people. Though competition in energy and telecommunications has led to greater consumer choice, the way in which change has been rolled out has left many confused about how to find the right service in increasingly complex markets.

Yet CHOICE has long seen competition policy as an opportunity to make it easier for consumers to find the best products and services at fair prices. The early work of our founder, Ruby Hutchison – the lone woman in the Western Australian upper house from 1954 to 1971 – focused on the importance of competitive markets. She used her position to take on cartels and price fixing in markets for everyday items like potatoes and clothes.

These days we still focus on the need for competition in the grocery market, but our interest has extended to other areas, like the market for digital content such as movies, TV shows and music.

So does the draft report suggest that this process will deliver for consumers? It makes a good start, by being clear that the main objective of competition policy should be to enhance consumer welfare over the long term. The report also identifies some markets that CHOICE has argued need more exposure to competition. One of these is the market for digital content, with support for our view that the current copyright laws effectively protect dominant businesses like Foxtel – meaning that Australians pay more for services that are of poorer quality than those available overseas.

Another industry that deserves the attention it gets in the report is the taxi industry, where controls on the supply of plates protect the large taxi networks, meaning that consumers pay more than they should. Moves by state governments to block new taxi and ride-sharing apps also come in for criticism.

More controversial are the proposals to introduce more competition in human services (such as health). While there's no doubt that there are some areas in which consumers would enjoy greater choice, this needs to be weighed against the importance of other factors, like the ongoing quality and consistency of government-funded services.

These debates will be waged through the rest of 2014 and into the new year, as the review panel completes its report and hands it over to the government. We'll be watching closely, because this is an opportunity – if we get it right – to put consumers at the heart of the next wave of economic reform.

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For general membership & consumer enquiries, phone 1800 069 552

CHOICE

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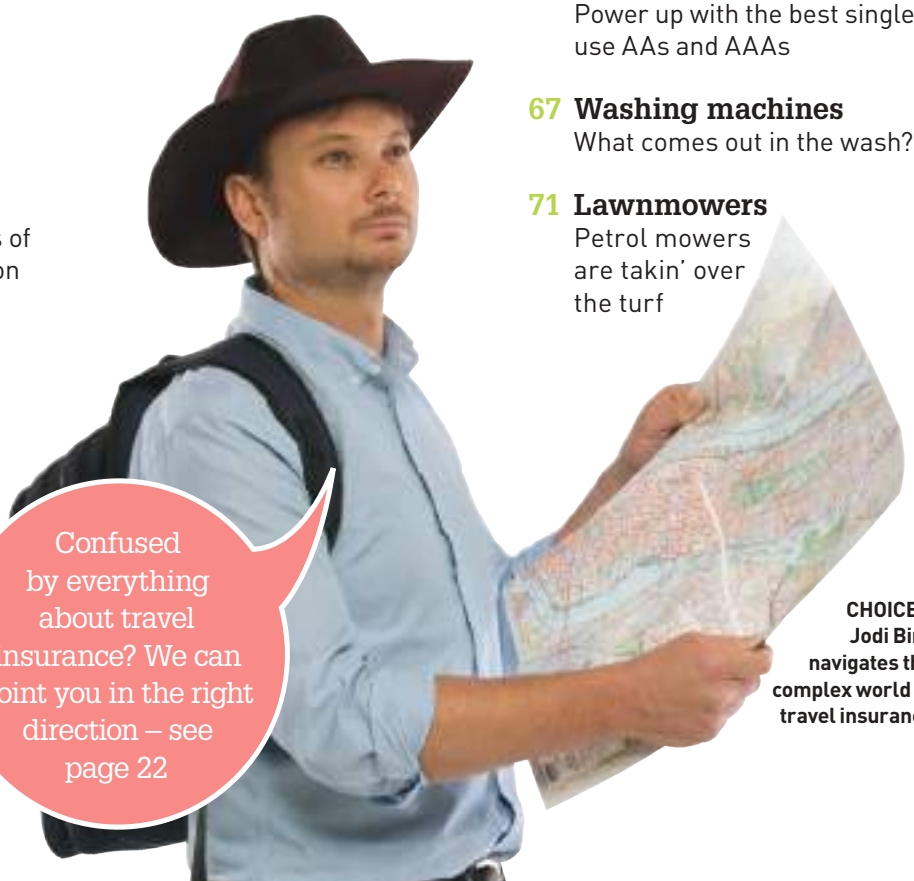


Confused by everything about travel insurance? We can point you in the right direction – see page 22

CHOICE's Jodi Bird navigates the complex world of travel insurance

TPP leak

WikiLeaks has released a new intellectual property chapter for the Trans-Pacific Partnership Agreement, also known as the TPP. The TPP negotiations are still dogged by secrecy, and the Australian public is forced to rely on leaked documents to gain an understanding of this important trade agreement.

CHOICE has analysed the leaked document, and unfortunately there's not a lot of good news to report. It seems that not much has changed since the last version of this chapter was leaked.

A provision that would effectively enable companies to continuously re-patent their drugs, delaying the release of cheaper generic versions, remains in the text. The silver lining is that, while this provision is still supported by the US and Japan, opposition from other countries seems to have grown, after public outrage following the last leak.

Opposition to some of the most damaging provisions has since been worn down. For instance, until recently there was substantial disagreement over the proposal to criminalise non-commercial copyright infringement – that is infringement that doesn't lead to any financial benefit. In the current draft, Canada is the only country left standing in opposition to this.

The entire TPP has been negotiated in secrecy, despite the fact that it has tremendous potential to impact on Australian domestic law and policy. Over 14,000 CHOICE campaign supporters called on the government to release the text, but they haven't listened yet, and time is quickly running out. **SARAH AGAR**

New campaign against data retention

A campaign called 'Stop the Spies' has launched to try to block the introduction of mandatory data retention laws in Australia. It urges people to voice their opposition to the scheme by contacting their politicians on social media or email. The campaign comes after national security laws were recently passed, criminalising reporting on special intelligence operations, and expanding the powers of agencies such as ASIO to monitor the internet. **ROS PAGE**

ASIC crackdown on life insurance

A review of the life insurance industry by the Australian Securities and Investments Commission (ASIC) found that as much as one-third of advice provided to consumers was poor, and that advisers who received high up-front commissions were more likely to provide poor advice to consumers.

ASIC conducted research on how life insurance was sold by advisers from small, medium and large Australian Financial Services Licensees, between September 2013 and June 2014, and looked at 202 cases of advice. The research showed only 63% of consumers received adequate advice, while 37% of consumers had received poor advice that failed to meet the relevant legal standard.

ASIC found that you're more likely to get bad advice from advisers who received an up-front commission – which can be up to 125% of your first year's premium. ASIC said that this clearly shows a conflict of interest.

"These results are yet more evidence that conflicts of interest in the advice industry are the root cause of bad consumer outcomes. The advice industry continues to fail consumers, because it persists in taking unfair and biased commissions," said Elissa Freeman, CHOICE Consumer Policy Manager.

CHOICE believes that financial advisers should be banned from accepting commissions, both one-off and ongoing, as well as asset-based fees, due to the influence these forms of payment have on the quality of advice offered. **UTA MIHM**

Banks in no hurry to take up superannuation reforms

A superannuation report from the Australian Prudential Regulation Authority (APRA) suggests that the banking industry is dragging its feet in its take-up of the MySuper regime, which is meant to reduce the high super management fees paid by three out of four Australian employees.

So far, a mere $13 bn in bank-owned and retail funds has been transferred to MySuper funds, leaving $77bn grandfathered in high-cost super funds, "so that banks can maximise revenues at the expense of Australians' retirement nest eggs," said Industry Super.

The industry super lobby has also accused the banks of "lobbying the government to scrap the default super safety net" so that they can continue to sell high-cost employee default funds to Australian employers.

The Australian Institute of Superannuation Trustees (AIST) has taken a similar view of the APRA report.

"A savings pool of $77 billion is a very large part of the super system, that is effectively locked out of the benefits of the generally low-fee MySuper environment," said AIST executive manager of policy, David Haynes. "This is not only discriminatory – it is not in members' best interests."

The launch of MySuper at the beginning of 2014 brought superannuation fees down by 26% across the industry in the first two months, a positive trend for consumers given the fact that Australian retirement fund fees are among the highest in the world.

ANDY KOLLMORGEN

Food rating website shoots for the stars

The George Institute for Global Health has launched FoodSwitch STARS, a new website which shows the health star rating (HSR) for around 55,000 packaged supermarket food products.

The George Institute computed each product's rating using the HSR scheme's calculator, plugging in their ingredients and nutrition information already held in the database behind its FoodSwitch app (which displays traffic-light nutrition ratings for food products).

Earlier this year, the future of the voluntary HSR scheme looked shaky when the government's original website, designed to help businesses roll out the new system and provide information about the ratings to consumers, was pulled down within hours of its launch.

A spokesperson for Assistant Health Minister Fiona Nash wasn't able to tell ABC News when the website would be re-launched, only that it would happen "when the campaign to inform consumers and industry ... is ready".

CHOICE is actively calling for food companies to embrace the HSR system and roll it out across all of their product ranges, and to implement the scheme properly. This means adhering to the style guide, so that label information is consistent and consumers can easily discriminate between foods in the same food category as well as comparing the ratings of foods across different food categories.

The Health Star Rating system is a voluntary scheme developed by consumer, health and industry groups, in a government-led process. Participating companies apply a rating between ½ a star and five stars to the front of their food packaging (the more stars, the healthier the product), helping Aussie consumers to become better informed about the food they buy, and to make healthier choices at a glance.

RACHEL CLEMONS

IMAGES: SHUTTERSTOCK

Thermomix reaches new heights

The Thermomix has a cult following around the world, and the new TM5 will continue to wow users with a new range of features.

The TM5 comes with a mixing bowl and lid, simmering basket, stirring attachment, measuring cup, spatula and Varoma (steaming bowl), a comprehensive recipe book, and detailed instructions. But most impressive is the 'basic' recipe book loaded into a magnetic electronic chip that you attach to the side of the unit, with on-screen prompts to guide you through each recipe. More recipe books will be available to buy in this format in the future.

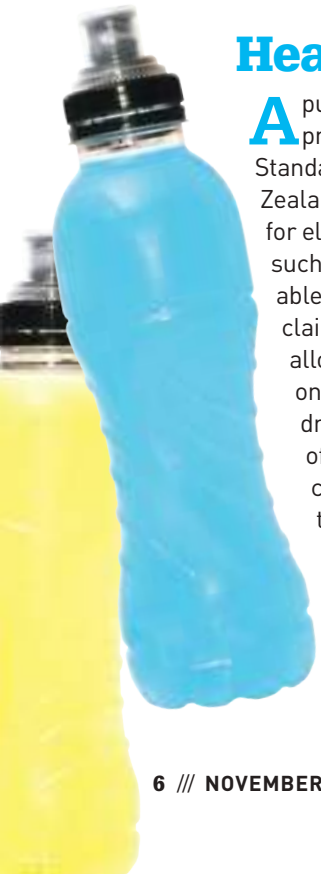
Fiona Mair, home economist from CHOICE's test kitchen, gave the TM5 a thorough workout by whipping, milling, blending, mashing, crushing, cooking, and chopping her way through a host of recipes. All performance tests she did produced excellent results bar one – beef rendang. The longest cooking time it can be set to is 99 minutes, so it's not too good for slow cooking. The meat was slightly tough, even after an extra 30 minutes of cooking, and the sauce was watery with little flavour development.

It's very easy to clean (all parts are dishwasher safe), and the electronic recipes and guides make using this appliance a walk in the park. It will beep to inform you it's time for the next step, and with a slightly larger bowl capacity than the TM31 at 2.2L (rather than 2L) you can cook larger batches. Minor points are that it's quite loud, will jolt about a little when mixing a heavy load, and it can be a little bit difficult to scrape thick mixtures from around the blade.

This upgrade has come up trumps, though, with the biggest benefit being that anyone can use it and master it almost immediately, thanks to its guided on-screen recipe chip.

MARTHA PSIROUKIS

THERMOMIX TM5
PRICE $2089
thermomix.com.au
★★★★½



Health claims on sports drinks misleading

A public consultation process run by Food Standards Australia New Zealand (FSANZ) is calling for electrolyte drinks (EDs) such as Gatorade to be able to carry health claims. CHOICE believes allowing health claims on these types of drinks, which are full of sugar, will mislead consumers into thinking they're a generally healthy option, and has made a submission opposing the current proposal.

EDs are specifically formulated for the rapid replacement of fluid, carbohydrates, electrolytes and minerals – ostensibly for people engaging in strenuous or prolonged exercise. Consequently, the Food Standards Code requires them to contain a certain amount of sugar and salt. A standard 600mL bottle of Gatorade contains 36g of sugar, for example, which is comparable to the 40g sugar in a standard 375mL can of Coca-Cola – both of which are labelled as single serves.

Under the current health claims standard, Gatorade wouldn't meet the Nutrient Profiling Scoring Criterion (NPSC), and therefore wouldn't be eligible to make a health claim on its label. However, the new proposal wouldn't require EDs to meet the NPSC in order to make such a claim.

EDs only benefit a small subset of the Australian population, and even then the benefits are limited. The Australian Institute of Sport states that serious athletes need to undertake high-intensity exercise of approximately 60 minutes or more to benefit from consuming EDs. But research indicates that many people drink them in situations unrelated to strenuous exercise, such as when they're simply feeling thirsty or hot, flat or lethargic, or even just a little bit hungover.

RACHEL CLEMONS

Energy contract price variation to continue

Unilateral price variation by energy retailers doesn't appear to be destined for the rubbish bin, in spite of the fact that the Australian Energy Market Commission (AEMC), which enacts and enforces pricing rules for energy retailers, admitted that it may be problematic.

In a draft rule determination issued earlier this year, AEMC acknowledged that some consumers "may be entering contracts unaware that prices may vary". In AEMC's view, the solution is to "provide greater transparency for consumers in relation to how prices may vary, when they sign up to a new contract".

Under proposed new AEMC rules, retailers would have to disclose the possibility of price changes to consumers when they sign a market contract, and spell out in the Product Disclosure Statement when and how price changes will be communicated.

Unfortunately, that's not quite what consumer advocates, in particular the Consumer Action Law Centre (CALC) and the Consumer Utilities Advocacy Centre (CUAC), hoped for. Both petitioned AEMC to put an end to mid-contract price changes.

From the standpoint of consumers, the detriment of unexpected price changes outweighs the detriment to electricity and gas retailers of not being able to vary prices, said CALC. We think that's a sound position, and CALC backs it up with a laundry list of how AEMC got its analysis wrong.

CUAC pointed out the continuation of unilateral price variation will mean that consumers "can spend time shopping around to find the best deal and sign a contract, but then find that the retailer can notify them straight away that it intends to increase the tariff".

ANDY KOLLMORGEN

Coles in more hot water from ACCC

Mere months after it was last taken to court by the Australian Competition and Consumer Commission (ACCC) for what was termed unconscionable conduct towards its suppliers, Coles is facing further action on the same charges. The move comes after the national supermarket chain was banned earlier this year from marketing its par-baked bread as "freshly baked".

This latest round of action has come out of the same investigation that led to the charges in May this year, when the ACCC took Coles to court alleging the supermarket was charging suppliers a fee to use an online "distribution portal" the supermarket had set up.

The ACCC has now accused Coles of pursuing agreements in 2011 that forced suppliers to pay Coles for "profit gaps" on goods (the difference between the amount of profit the supermarket had wanted to make and the amount it achieved), "waste" on a supplier's goods that occurred after Coles had accepted them, and price reductions implemented by Coles. The supermarket also penalised suppliers for short or late deliveries.

The ACCC alleged that the causes of both profit gaps and "waste and markdowns" were usually outside the control of suppliers, and that the amount of the fines Coles imposed was unrelated to the value of the goods, to any loss that Coles might actually have suffered from the short or late delivery, or to the reasons for the short or late delivery.

Among other allegations, the ACCC said Coles put pressure on its suppliers by using its superior bargaining position, and demanded agreements to pay money where it knew, or should have known, that it had no legitimate basis for doing so.

ZOYA SHEFTALOVICH

IMAGES: SHUTTERSTOCK

New warning on painkillers for dehydrated kids

Parents are being advised to ask their doctor or pharmacist before giving certain over-the-counter painkillers to children with diarrhoea or vomiting. This is in part because non-steroidal anti-inflammatory drugs (NSAIDs), including ibuprofen (the active ingredient in Nurofen), may cause kidney damage in people who are dehydrated.

While many are aware NSAIDs are linked with gastrointestinal side effects, their effects on the kidneys are less well known. Renal impairment is mostly mild, short-lived and reversible, but more serious consequences are possible.

Paediatric NSAIDs are required to carry the warning label: "Ask your doctor or pharmacist before use of the medicine in children suffering from dehydration through diarrhoea and/or vomiting".

Experts are now calling for the warning to be expanded to all over the counter NSAIDs – that is, for adults and children. Adults on some medications, including anti-hypertensive medication containing a diuretic, are also susceptible to kidney damage from NSAIDs. People taking NSAIDs for pain relief before or during strenuous sports and outdoor activities – where dehydration may be a risk – may also be susceptible to kidney damage. **KARINA BRAY**

Wiping the floor with an all-in-one

The Bissell Vac & Steam is a gadget designed to vacuum and/or steam hard floors (including sealed wood floors). The Vac & Steam's selling point is that you can use both cleaning functions at the same time. Debris is collected by the vacuum, followed by the trigger-operated steam mop that sits behind it. We found it easy to use in this way on a hard floor, but to really see how well each function performed, we assessed them separately.

The Vac & Steam is generally easy to use – you just fill the water container, switch the unit on and let it heat up. It can be filled up on the go, so it doesn't need to be cooled down between refills. Manoeuvring the mop head wasn't too difficult but still required a bit of effort, as did removing the water tank lid.

To put it through its paces, our tester Peter Horvath spread sand on a hard floor, where it picked up an impressive 97.3 per cent of debris. However, the cleaning process was cumbersome: vacuuming had to be done very slowly, as the cleaning head tended to pull some of the sand backwards.

Next up, we tested the steam mop on PVC tiles with various stains. Overall, the Vac & Steam does an OK job. In particular, it's excellent at cleaning soy sauce, and does a good job removing red wine and tomato sauce. Its score was brought down by borderline coffee-removal performance, as well as poor handling of mustard and shoe polish stains. One bonus is that it will leave your floor only slightly damp after use, with very little water left behind.

CHOICE verdict

While the idea of having a combined steam mop and vacuum sounds like it will make life easier, the rather costly Vac & Steam is not revolutionary and won't suit every household. The slow vacuum process means that even if you use the steam function simultaneously, you probably won't be saving a huge amount of time. What's more, it's optimised for hard floors, so anyone with carpet in their home is better off with a top-performing, standalone vacuum cleaner. And while the steam mop results impressed in some areas like with soy and tomato sauce spills, there were some tougher stains that just got the better of it.

KIM GILMOUR

BISSELL VAC & STEAM
PRICE $369
CONTACT bissell.com.au

Apple iPhone 6 and iPhone 6 Plus: bigger, better, later

IPHONE 6 & 6 PLUS
PRICE From $869 for iPhone 6 up to $1249 for iPhone 6 Plus
CONTACT www.apple.com.au

The iPhone 6 and 6 Plus look dramatically different to previous iPhones, with a more curved edge – in keeping with the latest Apple iPad tablet range – and much larger screens.

Both iPhone 6 models are available in silver, gold and 'space grey', and in three capacities (16GB, 64GB and 128GB). Since Apple's OS uses up 6GB, a 16GB iPhone 6 only has 10GB available for video, photos and a few music albums, so the 64GB model would be our recommended option.

The power button for the iPhone 6 is on the side of the phone, making it easier to turn on the larger device one handed, although a bit of finger and thumb gymnastics may be required when using the 5.5-inch 6 Plus.

At 8Mp, the iPhone 6 and 6 Plus have the same image resolution as the 5S, yet the new camera sensor produces noticeably improved images. The 6 Plus also has optical image stabilisation. As a result, it delivers clearer photos in low light and sharper video in most situations. The camera lens protrudes slightly on both iPhone 6 models though, so if you brush the phone across the edge of a table, you can catch the edge of the lens, causing damage. But if you use a protective case, this shouldn't be an issue.

The latest iOS 8 software offers several additional improvements over the previous iOS 7, although the look and feel remains very similar. Cool camera features in iOS 8, such as time lapse photography and slow motion HD Video (120fps), are already available on the iPhone 5, 5C and 5S mobiles, though the iPhone 6 models can also capture video at 240fps in slow motion mode.

One of the most significant new features in the iPhone 6 range is its support for Near Field Communication (NFC), a wireless technology that has been around for several years on other smartphones. However, unlike other Android and Windows smartphones, NFC on the iPhone 6 can't be used to connect to speakers or share data wirelessly. It's purely for making wireless payments through Apple's payment system, which Australians won't be able to enjoy until local retailers sign up, and where Apple will get a cut for every dollar spent.

CHOICE verdict

If you like your iPhone 3G, 3GS or 4 but want a bigger screen and a better camera, you'll be amazed at what the iPhone 6 can do, and iPhone 4S users may want to consider the upgrade to really enjoy the new features of iOS 8. But if you own an iPhone 5S you might want to wait until the next version of the iPhone 6 is released. History's shown that the first versions of new iPhones lack several useful features that end up appearing in the update.

DENIS GALLAGHER

IMAGES: SHUTTERSTOCK

SHONKYS 2014

And the lemon goes to ...

Ahh spring: the flowers are blooming, the sun is shining, and there's a zesty whiff of lemon in the air. It can only mean one thing: CHOICE has been hard at work tracking down the poorest products, shoddiest services, and most ridiculous terms and conditions for our annual name-and-shame-athon, the **2014 Shonky Awards**.

You'd be forgiven for thinking companies would be trying their best to do right by consumers and avoid CHOICE's fine-tooth comb. Not so, it would seem, as this year we have a collection of doozies just begging for a giant lemon. So without any further ado, let's get to the awards no-one wants to win ...

THE SHONKY AWARD FOR...

Spicing up the truth GOES TO

ARNOTT'S TIM TAMS PEANUT BUTTER FLAVOUR

We know what you're thinking. Tim Tam is Australian for biscuit. How could we possibly find fault with the greatest thing since ... But bear with us.

You may have noticed Arnott's recent expansion of the humble Tim Tam range. One recent premium release is their most requested flavour: peanut butter. But here's the spicy truth – although they proudly display an enticing image of what looks exactly like peanut butter generously smeared across the pack, closer inspection of the ingredients list reveals the product contains no peanut butter at all.

Who knew that mixing paprika extract and caramel food colours results in a rather striking shade of peanut butter?

On a serious note, Food Standards Australia and New Zealand says "labels must tell the truth" and "Fair trading laws and food laws in Australia and New Zealand require that labels do not misinform through false, misleading or deceptive representations. For example, a food with a picture of strawberries on the label must contain strawberries".

And here's the final rub: if you can forgive the fact that these biscuits are about as full of peanut butter as a Hungarian spice rack, it's hard to look past the fact that while they cost the same, there are only nine biscuits and 165g in a pack – two biscuits and 35g shy of a regular packet of Tim Tams. Not that you'd notice if you were just scanning the shelf, what with the packaging being the same size.

And don't worry, the CHOICE Shonky Awards are always 100 per cent lemon.

THE SHONKY AWARD FOR...

Milking parental guilt GOES TO S-26 GOLD TODDLER & JUNIOR

My two-year-old loves eating his leafy greens, said ... no-one. Ever. Ensuring kids get the nutrients they need is hard, especially when you're trying to duck the mash thrown by your little darling.

In desperation you might fork out money for the formula that proclaims it provides "nutritional support for young kids", not knowing that health professionals advise that toddler and junior milks aren't needed for healthy kids over the age of one, or that you may even be doing your child a disservice by offering another liquid at a time when the focus should be on increasing solids and developing better eating habits.

And to make matters worse, in marketing its S-26 Gold Toddler and Junior powdered milk drinks to retailers in an industry trade magazine, S-26 offers this devious dose of spin: "Keep mums buying with our extended range of nutritious milk drinks".

For milking parental guilt in a toddler and junior formula market worth almost $100m, we think it's time S-26 was watered down with a hefty dose of lemon.

IMAGE: SHUTTERSTOCK.COM

THE SHONKY AWARD FOR...

Raiding the piggybank GOES TO BANKWEST

On the surface, the Bankwest Kids' Bonus Saver account's 5.75% interest rate is a great way to teach children the benefits of saving. But look a little deeper, and it soon becomes clear that a very different lesson is being imparted: don't trust the banks, Johnny and Daisy, they may give with one hand, but they take with the other.

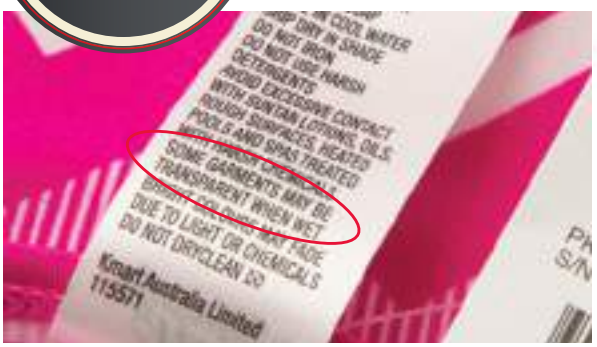
Sure, the bank offers the highest interest rate on the market for young savers, but the account comes with one big, fat asterisk. That 5.75% rate is a teaser, valid for 12 months only. After paying a decent rate for a year, Bankwest sweeps all but $1 into a low-interest account paying just one per cent for amounts below $3000. And to make matters worse, they spin this bit of dastardly action as a positive for the kids. Apparently, it's "so they can start their savings all over again".

But the bad news doesn't end there. Bankwest is quick to punish young savers if they make any withdrawals, with the interest dropping to a mere 0.01% in that month. To say nothing of the $25 minimum monthly deposit that puts young savers and their parents under pressure to keep topping up to get that shiny headline rate.

Sucking kids in with teaser rates before slapping them with dramatic interest rate cuts is a far cry from rewarding and encouraging children to save. But if all Bankwest wanted was to teach kids that banks aren't their friends: job done.

THE SHONKY AWARD FOR...

Sheer cheek GOES TO KMART SWIMWEAR



As the weather warms and the beach becomes more and more appealing, people around the country are buying swimsuits in preparation for our national summer pursuit: getting ourselves to the nearest body of water. And sure, the cut and colour of a pair of togs are important. But when it comes to Kmart swimwear, that seems to be where the design process stops.

Excuse us for getting philosophical, but is a swimsuit really a swimsuit if its label proclaims that it may become see-through when wet? And why can't it take "excessive contact" (whatever that means) with suntan lotions, oils, rough surfaces, heated pools and spas treated with harsh chemicals? We're not sure what Kmart reckons Aussies do in their swimwear. Call us old-fashioned, but what happened to cossies that you could, oh, you know, wear in a heated pool without fear of disintegration or impending nudity?

It just goes to show: when it comes to buying a pair of togs that are fit for a purpose, you can't count on Kmart. We just have one question: does that little number come in Shonky yellow?

THE SHONKY AWARD FOR...

Banking on an apology GOES TO COMMONWEALTH BANK OF AUSTRALIA

CBA presided over one of the worst financial planning failures in Australia, leaving thousands of clients with broken dreams, disappearing bank balances and a rocky retirement. What they did after this scandal makes them particularly worthy of one of CHOICE's most rotten lemons this year.

According to a senate inquiry, CBA's financial planners orchestrated a "calculated deceit", and deliberately (and in some cases fraudulently) put clients into inappropriate investments to meet bonus goals, costing consumers millions of dollars, and leading to lost life savings and ruined lives. To make matters worse, the compensation offered was not only hard-won, but potentially insufficient. So grave was this case that the inquiry recommended a Royal Commission be established to deal with the matter.

After waiting years for an apology, customers were finally treated to a PR campaign that was high on talk but, so far, low on action. CBA has also lobbied to water down important financial advice protections that might protect consumers from similar problems in the future. Mere weeks later, CBA salted the wounds of their customers by posting a profit of over $8bn.

Which bank can be guilty of eye-watering hypocrisy? CON Bank can.

THE SHONKY AWARD FOR...

Comparing apples with oranges GOES TO AMAZON KINDLE

Ah creative accounting. In the grand tradition of math magicians the world over, we welcome the Amazon Kindle Paperwhite.

Sure, the e-reader and its 3G sister are fine products: they've been among the top picks in our e-reader tests. But it's their claims about battery life that've had us pack a crate of lemons to be delivered to Amazon HQ.

So what's the issue? Amazon states an impressive eight weeks of battery life from a single charge for its backlit Kindle Paperwhite. The advertising for the gadget compares its battery life to a laptop (a measly five to nine hours), a tablet (five to 10 hours) and a smartphone (four to 13 hours). Their bar graph shows the Paperwhite's battery life should be at least 10 times better than any of its competitors!

But while the stats for battery life for the laptop, tablet and smartphone are presumably based on continuous use, fine print says the Paperwhite's boasted eight weeks is based on just 30 minutes of reading per day.

That's like a lollipop that lasts a whole year (as long as you have just one lick a day).

The Kindle's actual battery life is 28 hours – still good, but relatively typical when compared to other e-readers.

So for trying to trick consumers by comparing apples with oranges, Amazon wins itself a juicy lemon.

THE SHONKY AWARD FOR...

Spinning dough GOES TO VORWERK/THERMOMIX

Let's begin with this caveat: the cult Thermomix all-in-one mixers are top-notch products. CHOICE forked out $1939 for a TM31, and we have nothing but praise for its performance. What has left a bad taste in consumers' mouths – and led to the awarding of this Shonky – is the secrecy and choppy communication around the launch of its first new model in seven years, the TM5.

The TM5, which in Australia costs just $50 more than the TM31, was released on 6 September with no prior warning, and some new owners took delivery of their full-price, soon-to-be superseded TM31s as late as a day or two before. Some people told us they asked about the rumoured new model when they were buying their TM31s, and were assured there was no upgrade on the horizon. And those who bought a TM31 with hopes of a high resale value may well be sorely disappointed – loyal Thermo fans lost hundreds of dollars off the value of their TM31s overnight.

With other high-value purchases like smartphones, consumers are usually warned before a new product goes on sale, so they can make an informed decision about whether to wait. If a company refuses, at the very least they should make sure their salespeople aren't giving customers misleading information in the lead-up to launch.

Thermomix Australia did eventually offer various sweeteners to those who'd bought their TM31 after 1 July. But it's a case of too little too late. And if you thought things couldn't get any worse, the TM31s were subjected to a recall due to a fault that could make affected machines splash out hot liquid.

For being less than upfront with loyal fans about the release of its new TM5 model, selling the TM31 at full price and delivering it right up to the day before the launch, and receiving the highest number of nominations in Shonkys history, we were left with no choice but to juice the Vorwerk/Thermomix lemon.

Your Say

We want to hear from you. If you've had a bad experience, been ripped off or scammed, tell us and help other CHOICE members avoid the same traps. If you've had a great response to a complaint you've taken to a manufacturer or retailer, our members want to know about that too! Letters may be edited for length and clarity, and we regret that we cannot reply to all correspondence.

Contact us!

Email us at **yoursay@choice.com.au** or write to Your Say, CHOICE, 57 Carrington Road, Marrickville, NSW 2204.

Gutter talk

Your cordless leaf blower tests didn't check the very best use they have: gutter cleaning. Gutters full of leaves are a serious fire hazard. Dirty gutters overflow and eventually rust out. Cleaning house gutters is difficult and dangerous, particularly from a ladder on a sloping site.

Falls from ladders often lead to hospital admissions, and broken bones can end the independence of older people. Sloping sites are actually most common in the high-risk fire areas on most city fringes. There are many gutter protection systems, which in my experience often don't work, are hard to fit, and even harder to clean behind. Cleaning the gutter while you stand safely on the ground is more important than blowing leaves off a lawn. Our Stihl blower provides a longer attachment for just this purpose. Please could you include this option in future tests?

Margaret McKenzie, Eden Valley, SA

CHOICE SAYS *Good point; cleaning roof gutters can be a difficult and potentially dangerous job. As far as we know, Stihl is currently the only brand to offer a gutter cleaning kit as an option for their garden blowers, though after-market options also exist. We'll look into this next time we test blowers.*

Bad credit

I have just received the October 2014 issue of *CHOICE* and was astonished to learn that Westpac charges a fee for credit card charges from "foreign registered companies" (Overseas fees, p 15). If ever there was an example of a fee without any basis in cost, this has to be it.

It's ironic that this same issue of CHOICE reports on the Maurice Blackburn class action over late credit card payment fees. It's almost as though Westpac is anticipating the loss of late payment fees and is instituting a new fee to replace the revenue. This Westpac fee appears to have even less justification than late credit card payment fees, where at least there is some cost to the banks – even if they do recoup hundreds of per cent more than those costs. As the letter writer points out, Westpac is charging (in some, though not all, transactions) a fee to convert AUD to AUD!

As a Westpac customer, I am rethinking my use of my credit card and whether to retain it. I'm not sure whether I want to deal with a bank that operates this way.

Valerie Horne, Erskine, WA

IMAGES: SHUTTERSTOCK

Thumbs

I would like to give Geneva Australia the thumbs up. I bought a portable sound system, which wouldn't work after using it about 10 times. I contacted Geneva and asked about the warranty, which they said was only 12 months. I sent them back an email stating that I was disappointed it wasn't a two-year warranty, as I had hardly used it and I had bought it 22 months ago, just short of two years. I was told by the manager to send the system to him, which I did, and within four working days it was returned by courier, working, with no charge. Needless to say I was one very happy customer.

Nicky Burgess, Wangi Wangi, NSW

I bought my Peltor radio earmuffs several years ago and, after many hours of use, the radio failed. I rang 3M (distributors for Peltor) to see if they had any spare parts and, although I had no receipts and the item was way out of warranty and not repairable, they willingly replaced my old radio earmuffs. They posted a new pair straight away via express post, all free of charge – including the postage.

John Bagrie, Legana, Tas

Determined to get my trusty ducted vacuum running again, I searched online for a new hose and found Aussie Vac Ducted

We suggest contacting the ACCC, as they have a process for reporting unsafe products.

Chemical inaction

LETTER OF THE MONTH

Recently I had a severe physical reaction (vomiting and migraines) to a domestic cleaning product that is marketed as being a lavender-scented ethanol. I have used pure ethanol and methylated spirits for many years as cleaning agents and have never had a reaction to them before now. I have tested the product several times, and I get sick or nauseous every time.

The Australian-based company that makes it has refused to tell me the synthetic chemicals they are using to mimic lavender, saying simply that according to the MSDS the chemicals are "non-hazardous". I spoke with someone who worked in the lab, and he did not know what the chemicals were either, as the wholesale bucket of lavender-scented chemicals, which came from somewhere overseas, had just "non-hazardous" on the label.

The label stated that the proportion of ethanol is only 70 per cent, which indicates that 30 per cent is made up of non-disclosed chemicals! I am very concerned that this high concentration of chemical scent will have even more severe effects on consumers with sensitivities or low immune systems.

I would like to find out if CHOICE has done any testing on similar domestic cleaning products, and what the Australian laws are about chemical disclosure from companies. Can you suggest any avenues for me to individually chase up in regards to finding out what chemical cocktail is making me so sick from this bottle of methylated spirits?

Imogen Ross, Austinmer, NSW

CHOICE SAYS *We investigated the lack of disclosure of cleaning agent chemicals last year (*CHOICE, *Oct 13), and sadly there is no mandatory requirement for cleaning products to name the chemicals used. CHOICE believes there should be more transparency for consumers so they can avoid similar situations to yours.*

Also concerning is that around 40,000 "safe" chemicals permitted for use in Australia haven't been tested by our national chemical regulator. Currently, we only have ACCORD's (an industry body) voluntary scheme, under which some manufacturers label the chemical ingredients. However, as it's voluntary, many of the ingredients are only on the brand's website and not the packaging. There is also little consistency over the naming of various chemicals.

We suggest contacting the ACCC, as they have a process for reporting unsafe products. Also ask the company to send you the full material safety data sheet (MSDS). They don't have to include every ingredient, and often proprietary ingredients such as fragrances may only be labelled "fragrance", but it's the best product information you'll be able to obtain. Often it will have a chemical number (CAS number) on it. Also look at the Environmental Working Group's database for a bit more information. ■

Vacuums. This company's website included information on how to do repairs, but my vacuum handle didn't match their demonstration model, so I couldn't follow their online instructions. I took the chance and emailed them a photo of my problem, including the make of my vacuum, hoping they might be able to assist. I received a phone call from their customer service department within five minutes, and within half an hour I was able to repair my broken vacuum hose. I was very impressed by the promptness of their reply, and the patient instructions given by the man who phoned.

Yvonne Death, Bella Vista, NSW

Cutting through the fat

Should you eat less fat? Or more? **Miranda Herron** weighs up the evidence

Over the past couple of years there has been a flurry of studies and opinion pieces suggesting that saturated fat has been unnecessarily demonised.

The ABC TV show *Catalyst* controversially weighed into the debate, featuring interviews with commentators who suggested there was no significant evidence that saturated fats increase the risk of heart disease.

Around the world headlines like "Everyone was Wrong: Saturated Fat is Good for You" popped up, offering the seductive message that saturated fat is no longer an enemy of good heart health.

But should we welcome lashings of pork crackling, pizza and full-fat cream back into our diets? The answer is no.

"The truth is that the considered scientific opinion, which recommends confining the intake of saturated fat to about eight per cent of your daily energy, has served us well," says associate professor David Sullivan, from the University of Sydney.

"Over the last 40 years we have succeeded in reducing the incidence of heart disease and stroke by two-thirds in developed countries. As well as factors such as lowered rates of smoking and better treatment, a constant feature of the dietary guidelines throughout this period has been saturated-fat restriction."

Media spin?

The idea that a diet low in saturated fat does not reduce the risk of cardiovascular disease caught the attention of the media, but nutritionist Dr Rosemary Stanton argues that much of the media response to the issue has been misleading, confusing and taken out of context.

Is butter better?

Not necessarily, but it's long been thought to be more natural than margarine. Western Star butter, for example, is made from pasteurised cream, water and salt. By contrast, MeadowLea Original Margarine, is made with vegetable, canola and sunflower oils, plus water, salt, flavour, milk solids, emulsifiers, preservative, food acid, natural colour and vitamins A and D.

But just because butter is "natural" doesn't mean it's healthier. The butter has 53.1g of saturated fat per 100g, compared to 16.5g for the MeadowLea.

Afraid of trans fats in your margarine? The good news is Aussie margarines are now virtually trans-fat free.

Butter is delicious, but health-wise it's sensible to save it for when you can really savour the taste.

"Unfortunately the conservative tried-and-tested advice to limit saturated fats is unappealing to the media, which likes to jump on 'new' information," agrees Sullivan. "There are also parts of the food industry that would benefit from the relaxation of public concern about saturated fat."

Some of the information that fed the pro-saturated fat frenzy was simply opinion rather than being scientific research, says Stanton, and other reports used questionable methodology.

One example, published in the *Annals of Internal Medicine* this year, was branded as "seriously misleading" with "major errors and omissions" by Dr Walter Willett, the chair of the Department of Nutrition at Harvard School of Public Health. He went on to say its "conclusions regarding the type of fat being unimportant are seriously misleading and should be disregarded".

Low-fat fad gone wrong?

There's nothing wrong with reducing saturated fat, explains Sullivan. Sadly, this advice has often been misinterpreted to mean avoiding all fat rather than just saturated fat.

"There is consistent evidence that cutting back on saturated fat can be good for health, if people replace saturated fat with unsaturated fats wherever possible," says Sullivan. "Replacing saturated fats with healthier monounsaturated and polyunsaturated oils provides essential fatty acids that control inflammation, consistent with the best available dietary advice for lowering the risk of other major chronic diseases, such as cancer."

Over the last 40 years, people have been choosing low-fat processed foods where fat is replaced with salt, sugar or low-fibre refined grains, rather than increasing their healthy fat intake or eating more fruit and vegetables.

Nutrient wars

The debate highlights that it has become fashionable to demonise individual nutrients or food groups as unhealthy, and to try and exclude that particular component from the diet, says Stanton.

"However, whether it's fat, gluten, grains, sugar or dairy products, the idea of removing one nutrient or food group in order to achieve better health or easier weight loss is problematic and unsustainable," she continues. "The key to a good diet is a wide variety of foods and moderation of less healthy foods."

Stanton also urges consumers to look for dietary information from reputable sources.

The best dietary advice

It's not glamorous, but the Australian Dietary Guidelines (**eatforhealth.gov.au**) offers the best source of dietary advice, says Sullivan. "We need to keep reinforcing the message that saturated and trans fats should be minimised, along with nutrient-poor, energy-dense foods such as refined carbohydrates, sugar and alcohol." And instead of focusing entirely on what not to eat, we need to reinforce the idea of making positive food choices, he suggests.

We should eat plenty of vegetables and fruits (which are high in nutrients and fibre but low in kilojoules), complex carbohydrates such as whole grains, low-fat dairy and lean unprocessed meats.

The Mediterranean diet reflects this desirable eating pattern, says Sullivan, as it's low in saturated fat and higher in mono- and polyunsaturated fats, found in olive oil and vegetable oils.

Traditionally, Mediterranean populations would eat six or more serves of fruit and vegetables a day, and small amounts of meat, fish, poultry, dairy, whole grains and moderate amounts of red wine. Sweet desserts would be confined to festive occasions.

Fat facts: the good, the bad and the downright ugly

Almost all foods contain some fat. An important source of energy, as well as omega 6 and omega 3 fatty acids that our body cannot manufacture itself, fats are also vital for the absorption of vitamins like A, D, E and K.

Components of fat are building blocks of all cells in the body and play important roles in metabolism and in the regulation of cell function.

Although the cholesterol in food has some influence on blood cholesterol levels, it's the type of fat you eat that mainly determines the amount of total cholesterol in the bloodstream.

Fats are commonly grouped into four categories: saturated, polyunsaturated, monounsaturated and trans fats. Although some fats are healthier than others, all fats have the same capacity to increase your body weight for the simple reason that fat has more kilojoules per gram compared to other nutrients.

As a general guide, fat has 37kJ per gram, protein has 17kJ/g and carbohydrates have 16kJ/g, while alcohol has 29kJ/g.

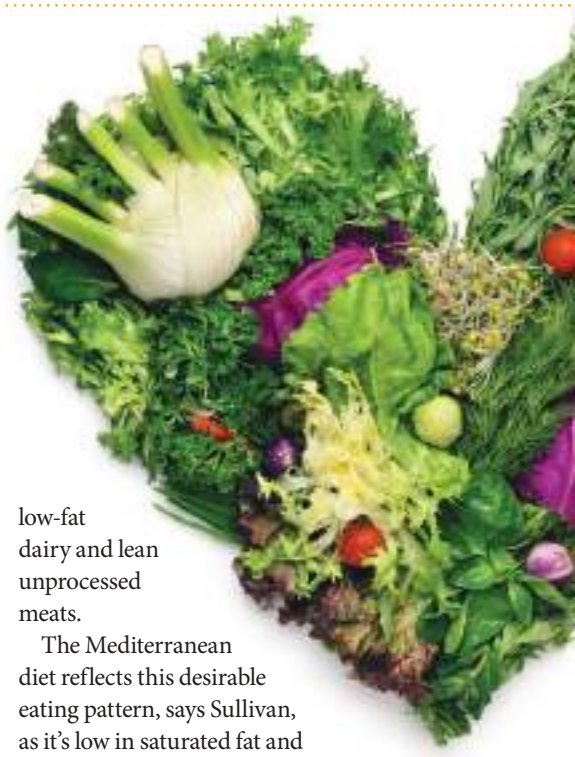


IMAGE: SHUTTERSTOCK

'Bad' fats …

Saturated fats are solid at room temperature and are mainly found in animal products, but there are also plant sources such as coconut and palm oils. As well, saturated fat is found in full-fat dairy products, fatty meats, sausages and in the processed vegetable oils used in biscuits, cakes, pastries, snack foods, confectionery and fried take-away foods.

The advice to limit saturated fat is given because it has been found to raise levels of 'bad' LDL cholesterol in blood.

When there's too much LDL in the blood, it can form sticky deposits (plaque) in the walls of the arteries throughout the body, which can narrow them, limit blood flow and increase the risk of blockages. If this happens around the heart, it can cause a heart attack. If it happens in the brain it can cause a stroke.

'Good' HDL cholesterol has been described by Harvard School of Public Health's *The Nutrition Source* as "the garbage trucks of the bloodstream" scavenging cholesterol from the bloodstream, from LDL, and from artery walls and ferrying it back to the liver for disposal.

In general, the lower your LDL and the higher your HDL, the better the chances of preventing heart disease and other chronic conditions.

'Good' fats …

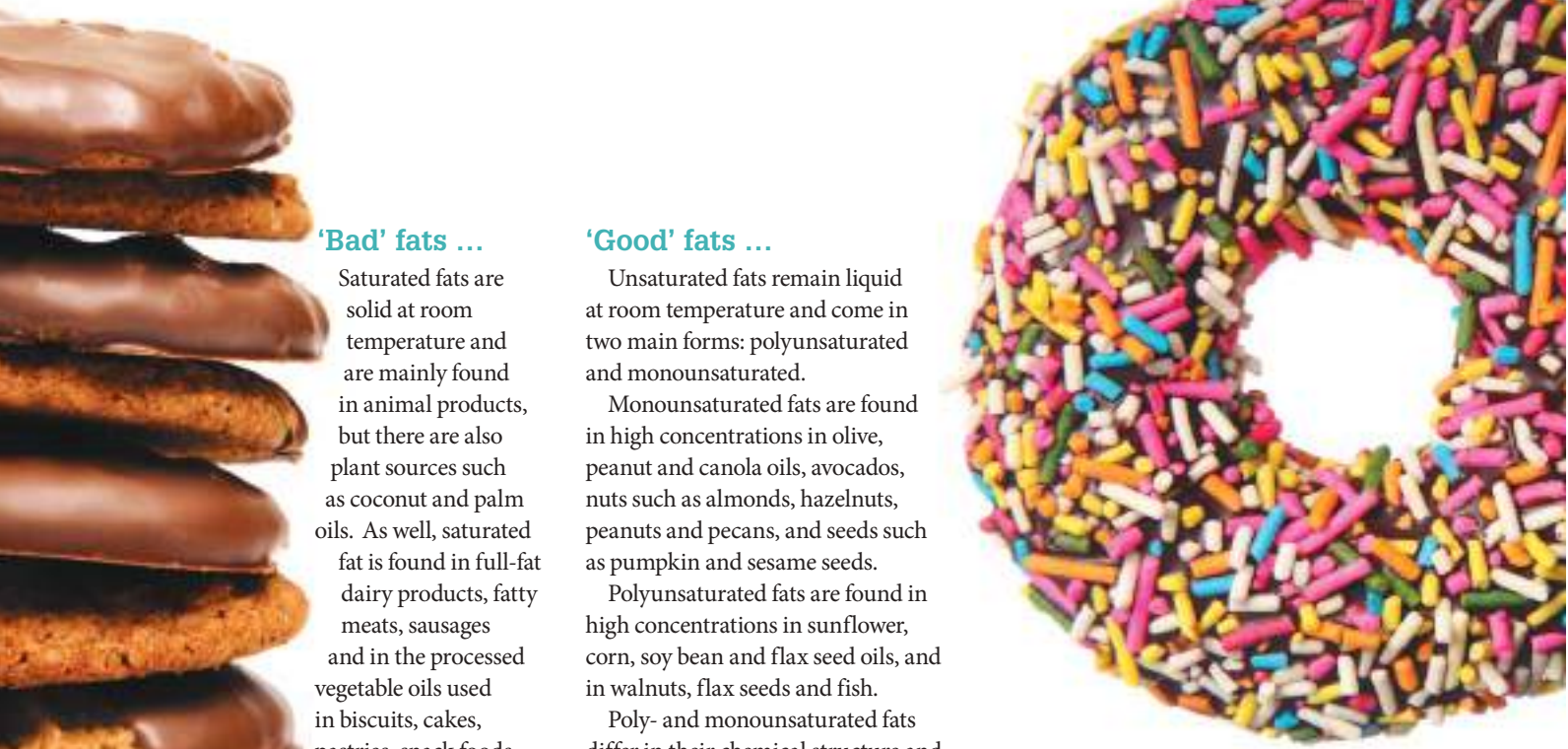
Unsaturated fats remain liquid at room temperature and come in two main forms: polyunsaturated and monounsaturated.

Monounsaturated fats are found in high concentrations in olive, peanut and canola oils, avocados, nuts such as almonds, hazelnuts, peanuts and pecans, and seeds such as pumpkin and sesame seeds.

Polyunsaturated fats are found in high concentrations in sunflower, corn, soy bean and flax seed oils, and in walnuts, flax seeds and fish.

Poly- and monounsaturated fats differ in their chemical structure and have slightly different health benefits as a result. There is evidence though, that eating more polyunsaturated and monounsaturated fats in place of saturated fat can lower the risk of heart disease. Polyunsaturated fat in particular is helpful in reducing the bad LDL cholesterol in your blood and increasing the good HDL cholesterol.

NOTE: Even healthy fats are high in kilojoules and shouldn't be overeaten, as they can contribute to weight gain.

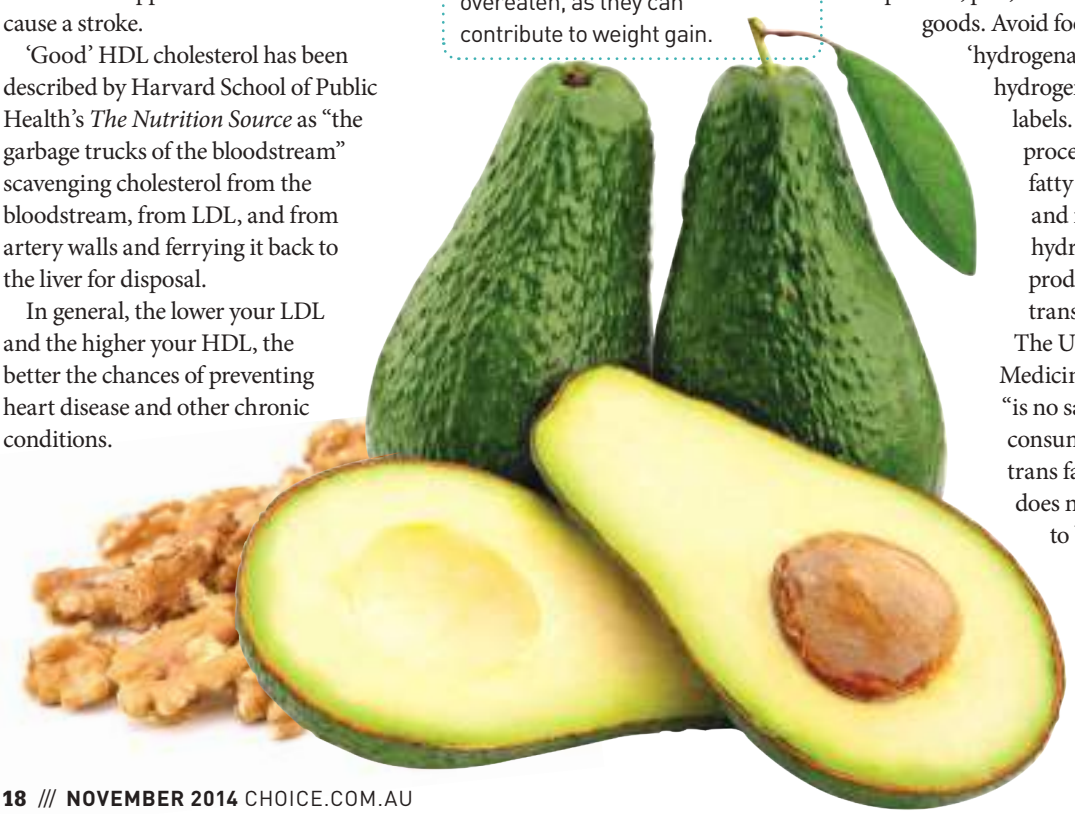


… and downright ugly fats

Trans fats have no redeeming nutritional features. They increase the risk of heart disease by increasing the bad LDL cholesterol, while also lowering the good HDL cholesterol in your blood. Small amounts naturally occur in dairy products, beef, veal, lamb and mutton.

However, a major source of artificial trans fats in our diets is processed vegetable fats, found in foods such as deep-fried and store-bought biscuits, pastries, pies, cakes and other baked goods. Avoid food with 'hydrogenated' or 'partially hydrogenated' listed on their labels. The hydrogenation process turns unsaturated fatty acids to saturated, and it's the partial hydrogenation that produces the nasty trans fats.

The US Institute of Medicine has declared there "is no safe level of consumption of artificial trans fats". Australian law does not require trans fats to be labelled on packaging – something CHOICE is calling to be remedied. ■



Around the world in travel scams

How to avoid scams while travelling overseas, and what to do if you fall victim to one

We've all heard tales of pickpockets swiping wallets, or taxi drivers speeding off with a car full of luggage, but some holiday horror stories are even more extraordinary. Unsuspecting travellers run the risk of a ruined trip – or worse – if they fall victim to clever scam artists who make a living by targeting tourists. We look at some of the sneakiest swindles around the world, how to avoid them and what to do if you get caught up in one.

Airport scams

Some travellers don't even get to experience culture shock before they're hit with the shock of being fleeced, just moments after landing in a new country.

Men in uniform

"As we arrived at Denpasar airport in Bali, two uniformed men met us at the baggage claim area. They picked up our bags, said 'customs' and motioned for us to follow them. We followed them obediently (and nervously) to the airport exit, where the pair promptly dropped our bags and stuck out their hands for a tip. They were porters, not customs officers. We were so confused – and unfamiliar with Indonesian currency – we tipped them about $5 each just to carry our bags a few metres!"
Megan and Scott (names changed)

Unscrupulous money changers

Many currencies have large denominations and it's easy to lose count of all those zeros when getting your money changed, especially when you've only just stepped off the plane.

The scanner scam

Somebody cuts in front of you in the queue for the airport security scanner – they set the metal detector off, holding you up. Meanwhile, their friend at the other end makes off with your valuables!

Luggage over the limit

Airport staff have been known to tamper with scales in order to pocket the excess baggage charges, so it pays to know how much your bags weigh.

What's in your bag?

It goes without saying that you should always pack your own bag and never carry luggage for anyone else, but beware the origins of brand-new bags,

IMAGE: SHUTTERSTOCK

too – illegal drugs have been found in suitcases won as prizes in online competitions.

Plan ahead

"Certain airports are notorious for scams, touts and even organised crime," says Angus Mackenzie, acting head of Consular and Crisis Management for the Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade (DFAT). "The easiest targets for scammers are travellers who look confused. So when you're planning your trip, work out a few key things like how you're going to get from the airport to your accommodation, how much that should cost and how you're going to pay."

AVOID PICKPOCKETS

- **Don't keep your wallet in your back pocket – it won't be there for long.**
- **If you have to carry valuables, put them securely inside your bag and casually keep your hand over the zipper when you're in a crowd.**
- **Remember that expensive watches, jewellery and cameras are tempting targets for thieves – so are passports, which can be worth thousands of dollars.**
- **Be extra careful after visiting the ATM or money exchange office.**

TAXI TIPS

Fair's fare? If you're fresh off the plane and have no idea how many rupees it will cost you to get from Delhi Airport to the Taj Mahal, do your research first using a website like **TaxiFareFinder.com** or **WorldTaximeter.com**. Guide books, airport websites and hotel staff can also give you an idea of what to pay.
A meter matters. In a perfect world, every taxi would have a working meter tallying the correct and legal fare, but a perfect world wouldn't be a very interesting place to travel, would it? If you can't find a taxi with a meter, negotiate the fare first. If you can't agree on a fare, or suspect you might be about to get fleeced, then ...
When in doubt, get out. If your driver tries to inflate the fare, just leave a reasonable amount on the seat and walk away. It's a good idea to have plenty of small notes and coins on hand for this reason, and because even the honest drivers might not be able to give you change.

Taxi scams

You don't have to travel the world to be taken for a ride by a dodgy cabbie, but taxi drivers in some countries could do far worse than drive you the long way home from the pub.

'I know a better place'

You tell your driver which hotel you want to go to, but they take you to a completely different one (which is probably owned by their cousin). They might say your hotel has closed down or is fully booked, or they might just surprise you by dropping you in the wrong spot and leaving you to figure it out for yourself!

The scenic route

Your driver takes you the longest possible way to your destination, ensuring they pocket the largest possible fare. Many of us have experienced this in Australia, too!

The bill swap

You give the driver a fifty, but look again and they're holding a five and insisting you've underpaid.

The bag swipe

Your bags are inside the cab, you're outside the cab, and the next thing you know the driver is speeding off with everything you own.

'That's not what I said!'

"Taking a cab to see Christ the Redeemer in Rio, the cabbie said it'd be 14 real on the way up and when he dropped us off afterwards he insisted he had said 40. That's what we get for not knowing Portuguese I guess. Similarly, a pedicab driver in Hanoi tried to tell us, after the ride, that the fee he had quoted was per passenger, not per ride." Tami

WATCH YOUR MONEY

The Commonwealth Bank recommends the following steps to avoid fraud overseas:

- Update your details before you go so your bank can call you at the first sign of suspicious activity.
- Avoid using public computers – hackers can install malware to record personal details. If you must, don't leave the computer unattended, delete your browsing history and login details, and ensure you log out when finished.
- Carry several different forms of money (cash and cards) to cover all eventualities.

Your passport is your most valuable document – you can't go far without it! Never give your passport as a form of deposit or ID, as scammers are aware of just how valuable they are. Hotel receptions will usually just ask for it to make a copy, but you should always get it back.

Credit card and ATM scams

Losing your credit card or unwittingly sharing your bank details can add thousands of dollars to your holiday expenses, and can quickly turn your trip into a nightmare.

"As I trekked blissfully unaware through the volcanoes of Guatemala, my bank account was drained in a series of withdrawals. It seems the ATM, or something affixed to it, in the graceful main plaza of Antigua had skimmed or cloned my card. Luckily, my bank refunded the money in the end." Catherine

"Always check the travel advice for your destination at **smartraveller.gov.au** – it will tell you the countries where card skimming or duplication are major problems," says Mackenzie. "Try wherever possible to keep your credit card in sight when making payments, and monitor your account activity online if you can."

CATCH THE BABY!

You're wandering the streets of Rome when suddenly a woman throws her baby at you, or drops the baby on the ground! As you fumble to help – and quickly realise the baby is only a doll – the woman's actual family members deftly help themselves to your bag.

Commotions like these are the perfect distraction for pickpockets. Watch out for skirmishes in crowds and helpful strangers appearing from nowhere with a towel when a bird inexplicably poops on your head (and your wallet vanishes).

Fake police

"Police officers in Bangkok tried to fine us 10,000 baht ($350) for littering. They said they'd seen us drop cigarette butts on the ground – but although I had a pack in my hand, we hadn't smoked a cigarette in over an hour. We told them we didn't have that kind of money on us so they offered to escort us to the ATM. I got straight on the phone to the Australian embassy and pretty soon they lost interest in us and started hassling other tourists. We were later told that very often it really is actual police, off duty. They walk and talk and act like real cops, so that makes it even more difficult to know." Sam and Rachel

Police – even the real ones – can prey on tourists who aren't familiar with local laws. Crooked cops in some countries have been known to issue tourists with an on-the-spot fine if they aren't carrying their passport, or to "search" wallets for counterfeit cash.

Is this your ring?

A passer-by asks if you've lost a ring. You tell them you haven't, but they give you the ring anyway and tell you it's your lucky day. As soon as you've accepted their gift, they demand payment. In a similar ruse, a friendly stranger might tie a bracelet around your wrist. If you refuse to pay for it, they'll (very loudly) call you a thief.

"If in doubt, the 'don't talk to strangers' rule applies," says Mackenzie. "The best way to avoid getting scammed by people on the street is to not engage in the conversation and walk away. And if a shop or market attendant offers you an item or product to hold, don't accept it if you don't have any intention of buying it."

Lost deposit

You return your rental car, motorbike or jet ski, and the owner spies some "damage" and decides to keep your deposit. Worse yet, the vehicle is "stolen" and you're charged for a full replacement.

Cases like these can be hard to argue, so try to avoid them altogether by choosing a reputable hire company recommended by your hotel or travel agent. Take photos of the vehicle and point out any damage to staff before you set out.

Make a plan

"Know before you go," says Mackenzie. "Be aware of the risks and what they might mean for your health, your bank account and the impact on your friends and family … This might mean scheduling flights so that you arrive during daylight hours, booking hotels at the right end of town or getting your currency sorted before you leave Australia, so that you're not trying to change money as soon as you arrive."

Check **smartraveller.gov.au** for up-to-date advice on scams and security risks in the country you're travelling to. Ask your travel agent for advice, and read the latest information on travel forums such as TripAdvisor and Lonely Planet.

And please, do remember to buy travel insurance! See our review of travel insurance on the CHOICE website to find the best deal for you.

Happy travels

It's important to have your wits about you when travelling, but most people aren't out to get you so don't be overly suspicious of everyone you meet. And don't forget to enjoy your holiday! ■

IMAGE: SHUTTERSTOCK

The right fit

Jodi Bird explains how to get the right travel insurance (without having to book a second holiday to get over the hassle of buying travel insurance)

Take a chunk of health insurance, a dollop of contents insurance and a pinch of cancellation insurance. Sprinkle in some public liability, life and hire car insurance, and you've got the one-size-fits-all solution – travel insurance. But how are you meant to decrypt just one of those products, let alone all of them thrown in together?

And not all travel insurance products are created equal either. So how can you make sure you're getting the right one for your needs?

Smart traveller

The Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade (DFAT) commissioned CHOICE to write a travel insurance buying guide to answer these questions for consumers. The guide is available for everyone to read at smartraveller.gov.au/insurance, but if you're already en-route to the airport here's our quick checklist:

- The **table of benefits** and the **policy cover section** are useful to check what's included or excluded in the policy. Make sure you have valuable items (like your digital SLR camera) covered.
- **Pre-existing medical conditions** are often not covered. This bit is essential reading for anyone with any kind of medical condition, no matter how mild.
- **General exclusions** is a list of events that aren't covered by any section of the policy. Not all policies provide cover for things like contracting ebola or injuries sustained while enjoying a tipple. So if you have a few drinks, then slip and break a leg, this may not be covered because, arguably, it happened while you were under the influence.
- The **word definition table** also clarifies important terms of the policy – a good place to check on the definition of a "relative" or even a "moped".
- The **claims section** lists some further pointers to avoid or be aware of (and the paperwork you may need to collect while you're away if you need to make a claim, such as police reports).
- Not all **activities** – for example, riding a moped or jumping out of a plane – are covered.

Where do I get it?

- **Online** – there are dozens of providers.
- With your **travel agent** or airline.
- Through **credit cards** – but look out for conditions.

Who delivers?

If you make a claim and you don't agree with the outcome, the first port of call is your insurer's internal dispute resolution process. If at the end of it you're still not happy you can escalate it to the Financial Ombudsman Service (FOS).

The FOS complaints table (right) shows the number of disputes they've received per 100,000 policies for a particular financial services provider (FSP). We've listed the name of each brand's FSP in the tables, so you can look them up in the table to see how likely consumers were to bring a dispute to FOS about them in 2013-14.

We don't use this data in our scoring because it's not available for all insurers, but it can be a useful guide to how well your chosen insurer is handling claims, and what the chances are of the claim going the insurer's way or yours.

The $ rating

In our review, we've ranked the policies from the cheapest ($), through to the most expensive ($$$$$) for each category.

The $ rating is based on the average premium for singles, couples and families across all four regions, Asia Pacific, Asia, Europe and Worldwide. In total, we collected over 1000 quotes across comprehensive, budget, annual and mature traveller categories.

The features score

We collected policy information from 30 insurers covering 81 comprehensive, budget, and annual multi-trip policies. Features are scored and each section is assigned a weighting. The overall score is made up of: medical (40%), cancellation (25%), baggage (20%), public liability (5%) and activities covered.(5%). The remaining 5% is made up of pre-existing conditions, life and total and permanent disability, dependants and rental car.

FOS DISPUTES			RESOLVED BY FOS	
Financial services provider (FSP)	Disputes per 100,000	Resolved by agreement (%)	Applicant's favour (%)	FSP's favour (%)
AAI	11.9	78	5	15
AIG	7.3	67	6	22
Allianz	1.4	74	13	11
CGU	16.1	71	6	18
Lloyds	5.8	70	3	24
QBE	10.6	78	4	10
Southern Cross Benefits	11.6	56	28	11

CHOICE buys comprehensive

Here we've assessed the policies that the insurers classify as their comprehensive insurance offering. They generally have higher levels of cover for medical, cancellation, baggage, public liability and cover for the excess on your car hire. Like most things in life, the more you pay, the more you get. But our CHOICE buys have above-average cover at below-average prices.

Good2Go – The Works The highest features score with the highest rating for medical, cancellation and baggage cover – together with the second-lowest grouping for average premiums – earns Good2Go's comprehensive policy a CHOICE buy. **Travel Insuranz Deluxe** has a high features score with the second-lowest grouping for average premiums. Below are the top-ranked insurers for comprehensive policies.

COMPREHENSIVE				MEDICAL				CANCELLATION				BAGGAGE		
	FSP	Price score	Features score (%)	Medical ($m) *	Natural disaster medical #	Terrorism medical #	Pandemic medical #	Cancellation ($) *	Natural disaster cancellation #	Terrorism cancellation #	Pandemic cancellation #	Baggage overall limit ($)	Baggage single item limit ($)	Cash limit ($)
AIG Comprehensive	AIG	$$$$$	77	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	na	✓	15,000	600	500
Good2Go The Works	AIG	$$	77	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	na	✓	15,000	600	500
Ouch Premier Plus Extras	QBE	$$$$$	75	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	na	✓	15,000	700	200
STA Travel Comprehensive	Allianz	$$$$	73	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	na	na	12,000	750	200
Bupa Super Plus	CGU	$$$$$	73	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	na	✓	12,000	1000	na
CGU Super Plus	CGU	$$$$$	73	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	na	✓	12,000	1000	na
Bupa Super	CGU	$$$	72	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	na	✓	10,000	800	na
CGU Super	CGU	$$$	72	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	na	✓	10,000	800	na
Travel Insuranz Deluxe	Online Insurance Brokers	$$	71	10.0	✓	✓	✓	✓	10,000	✓	✓	7500	1500	600
Travel Insurance Cover Comprehensive	QBE	$$$$	71	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	na	✓	12,000	700	250
Jetstar Platinum Plan	AIG	$$$$$	70	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	na	✓	10,000	600	na
Southern Cross Travel Insurance TravelCare	Southern Cross Benefits	$	69	✓	✓	100,000	✓	50,000	✓	na	na	25,000	1500	500
GIO Holiday Travel	AAI	$$$$	68	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	na	✓	6000	700	250
Westpac Holiday Travel	AAI	$$$	68	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	na	✓	6000	700	250
Aussietravelcover Super Plus	Allianz	$$$$	68	✓	✓	✓	na	✓	✓	na	na	10,000	750	250
Jetstar Gold Plan	AIG	$$$$$	68	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	na	✓	5000	500	na
Worldcare Comprehensive	Allianz	$$	66	✓	✓	✓	na	✓	✓	na	na	12,000	750	250
1300insurance Comprehensive	Allianz	$	65	✓	✓	✓	na	✓	✓	na	na	7500	750	250
Allianz Comprehensive	Allianz	$$$$	65	✓	✓	✓	na	✓	✓	na	na	10,000	750	250
Travel Insurance Plus Comprehensive	Allianz	$$$	65	✓	✓	✓	na	✓	✓	na	na	15,000	750	500
Virgin Australia Comprehensive	Allianz	$$$$	65	✓	✓	✓	na	✓	✓	na	na	5000	750	250
Virgin Money Comprehensive	Allianz	$$	65	✓	✓	✓	na	✓	✓	na	na	7500	750	400
Columbus Direct Premier	Lloyds	$$	65	20.0	✓	200,000	✓	15,000	✓	na	✓	7500	750	1000

Only top-rated policies are shown. * A tick indicates 'unlimited'. **na** means 'not covered'. # A tick indicates 'no sublimit', but cover is assessed on individual circumstances.

IMAGE: SHUTTERSTOCK

BUDGET				MEDICAL				CANCELLATION				BAGGAGE		
	FSP	Price score	Features score (%)	Medical ($m) *	Natural disaster medical #	Terrorism medical #	Pandemic medical #	Cancellation ($) *	Natural disaster cancellation #	Terrorism cancellation #	Pandemic cancellation #	Baggage overall limit ($)	Baggage single item limit ($)	Cash limit ($)
Bupa Standard	CGU	$$$$	66	0.3	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	na	✓	5000	500	na
CGU Standard	CGU	$$$	66	0.3	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	na	✓	5000	500	na
Travel Insuranz Classic	Online Insurance Brokers	$	62	10.0	✓	✓	✓	2500	✓	✓	✓	2500	250	125
STA Travel Basic	Allianz	$$$$$	61	10.0	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	na	na	3000	500	na
Virgin Australia Essentials	Allianz	$$$$	61	✓	✓	✓	na	✓	✓	na	na	5000	750	na
Aussietravelcover Basic Super Plus	Allianz	$$$$$	59	✓	✓	✓	na	3000	✓	na	na	3000	750	250
Columbus Direct Standard	Lloyds	$$$	58	12.5	✓	125,000	✓	10,000	✓	na	✓	6000	750	500
Travel Insurance Plus Essentials	Allianz	$$$$	56	✓	✓	✓	na	10,000	✓	na	na	3000	750	na
Fast Cover Standard	Allianz	$$$	55	✓	✓	✓	na	✓	✓	na	na	5000	750	na
Good2Go Essentials	AIG	$	54	5.0	✓	✓	✓	10,000	✓	na	✓	3000	250	na

ANNUAL				MEDICAL				CANCELLATION	BAGGAGE		ANNUAL COVER	
	FSP	Price score	Features score (%)	Medical ($m) *	Natural disaster medical #	Terrorism medical #	Pandemic medical #	Cancellation ($) *	Baggage overall limit ($)	Baggage single item limit ($)	Days for leisure travel per trip	Option to extend days of travel?
AIG Frequent Traveller	AIG	$$$$	77	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	15,000	600	45	No
Good2Go Frequent Traveller	AIG	$	77	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	15,000	600	45	No
STA Travel Annual Multi Trip	Allianz	$$$$	73	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	12,000	750	31	No
Travel Insurance Cover Annual Multi Trip	QBE	$$	72	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	15,000	1000	60	0
Travel Insuranz Deluxe Annual Multi Trip	Online Insurance Brokers	$$$$	71	10.0	✓	✓	✓	10,000	7,500	1500	31	Yes
GIO Annual Multi-Trip	AAI	$$$$$	70	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	8,000	900	90	No
Westpac Frequent Traveller	AAI	$$$$$	70	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	8,000	900	90	No
Southern Cross Travel Insurance Multi Trip	Southern Cross Benefits	$$$$	69	✓	✓	100,000	✓	50,000	25,000	1500	90	Yes
Aussietravelcover Annual Multi-Journey	Allianz	$$$$	67	✓	✓	✓	na	✓	10,000	750	37	No
Worldcare Frequent Traveller	Allianz	$$	67	✓	✓	✓	na	✓	12,000	750	37	No
1300insurance Annual Frequent Traveller	Allianz	$	65	✓	✓	✓	na	✓	7,500	750	37	No
Allianz Frequent Traveller	Allianz	$$$	65	✓	✓	✓	na	✓	10,000	750	45	No
Travel Insurance Plus Frequent	Allianz	$	65	✓	✓	✓	na	✓	15,000	750	15; 30; 45	No
Virgin Australia Annual Multi-Trip	Allianz	$$$	65	✓	✓	✓	na	✓	5,000	750	37	No
Virgin Money Frequent Traveller	Allianz	$$$$$	65	✓	✓	✓	na	✓	7,500	750	62	No
Columbus Direct Annual Multi-Trip	Lloyds	$$$	65	20.0	✓	200,000	✓	15,000	7,500	750	60	No

CHOICE buys budget

Budget offerings cover medical essentials with reduced or excluded cover for cancellation and baggage at more affordable prices than the comprehensive offering.

Travel Insuranz Classic The second-highest features score for budget policies with low premiums make this the best budget buy.

CHOICE buys annual multi trip

If you travel regularly throughout the year for periods of up to 90 days at a time then an annual multi-trip policy may be best suited to your needs. Policy travel times vary from a maximum of 15 days to 90 days. CHOICE buys are Travel Insurance Cover Annual Multi Trip and Good2Go Frequent traveller.

CHOICE buys mature traveller

To qualify, a policy must be available for people over 65 and have cover for pre-existing conditions.

The mature traveller $ rating is based on the average premium for a 65-year-old couple. The price may increase each year after a set age. See 'Age at which price loading applies', in table.

MATURE AGE				MEDICAL		
	FSP	Price score 65 year old couple	Features score (%)	Policy age limit	Pre-existing approval	Age at which price loading applies
AIG Comprehensive	AIG	$$$$$	77	69	✓	50
Good2Go The Works	AIG	$$	77	69	✓	50
Apia Comprehensive	AAI	$$$$	76	Unlimited	✓	70
STA Travel Comprehensive	Allianz	$$$$	73	Unlimited	✓	35
Bupa Super Plus	CGU	$$$$$	73	Unlimited	✓	70
CGU Super Plus	CGU	$$$$$	73	Unlimited	✓	70
Bupa Super	CGU	$$$$$	72	Unlimited	✓	70
CGU Super	CGU	$$$$	72	Unlimited	✓	70
Travel Insurance Cover Comprehensive	QBE	$$$$$	71	Unlimited	✓	No loading
Southern Cross Travel Insurance TravelCare	Southern Cross Benefits	$$	69	Unlimited	✓	55
GIO Holiday Travel	AAI	$$$	68	Unlimited	✓	60
Westpac Holiday Travel	AAI	$$$	68	Unlimited	✓	60
Aussietravelcover Super Plus	Allianz	$$$	68	Unlimited	✓	51
Worldcare Comprehensive	Allianz	$$	66	85	✓	51
Allianz Comprehensive	Allianz	$$$$	65	Unlimited	✓	81
Travel Insurance Plus Comprehensive	Allianz	$$$	65	Unlimited	✓	No loading
Virgin Money Comprehensive	Allianz	$$	65	Unlimited	✓	50
Columbus Direct Premier	Lloyds	$$	65	84	✓	50

Cover your assets

The FOS found intermediaries such as travel agents are more likely to have complaints made about them misrepresenting travel insurance policies because they might not ask the right questions about the consumer's needs. So protect yourself by making sure you ask what is covered and what is excluded from your policy.

CHOICE tip

Cover for mental illness can be difficult to get. Of the insurers we surveyed, only CGU and Bupa cover pre-existing conditions, such as anxiety and bipolar disorder. Also, medical conditions incurred between trips are considered a pre-existing condition on your next trip with some policies. Check with your insurer before you buy.

Law of the land

Do you know your rights under Australian Consumer Law? Being aware of the rules of refunds, exchanges and discounts can save you time and money this festive season.

Between early Christmas shopping, last-minute Christmas shopping, Boxing Day sales and the (hopefully) occasional returning or exchanging of not-quite-right gifts, it's easy to end up feeling like you've spent most of December and January wandering through shopping centres and department stores in a daze. Your local shopping hub will likely be full of hustle and bustle, signs and spruikers, special deals and shiny new toys. Make sure you know your rights before you begin, and have a few strategies in place to make the busiest shopping season in your calendar a little less stressful.

Your rights

Your rights as a consumer are protected under the Australian Consumer Law (ACL) – a set of legal protections for Australians in all states and territories that came into effect in 2011, and by which all businesses selling goods or services must abide. The ACL enforces that when you buy something, the merchant guarantees that your purchase will do what it's intended to do, last a reasonable amount of time and cost the advertised price, among other things. It also sets out your rights and obligations – and those of the retailer or supplier – if your purchase is not up to scratch.

Unhappy returns

Retailers often put a time limit on change-of-mind returns – seven or 14 days, for example – but many stores will have a more generous window for returning gifts purchased around Christmas. So if you're an organised giver who starts the Christmas shopping early, it's a good idea to check when the extended window begins, as purchases made in early November, for example, may not be able to be exchanged in late December or early January (the exception being for faulty items).

If you're planning on returning a gift you've received or purchased, it's worth calling the store in advance to find out if they have an extended return window, and if so, when it ends. Don't leave it to

GIFT RECEIPTS

If you're not 100 per cent sure the recipient is going to love what you've given them, ask if the store can print you a "gift receipt". This is a receipt showing all the relevant purchase information except the price paid. It allows you to provide the receipt along with the present just in case it needs to be exchanged, without the potential awkwardness of revealing to someone exactly how much you spent on them.

the last minute though. You may be restricted to an exchange rather than a refund, particularly if you don't have a proof of purchase, and as sales wind down, the selection of items on shelves may be a bit limited.

If you're returning a gift you bought or received because it wasn't the right size, was an accidental double-up or just wasn't to your taste, keep in mind that this is a "change of mind" return, and retailers aren't obliged to provide you with a refund. They may be happy to exchange it or provide a credit note.

If you don't have a receipt, there are a number of options when it comes to proof of purchase: your credit card or debit card statement, store card statements, your customer history (if the store has your details on file) or the store's own records, or a combination of these details. Copies or photos of receipts are also acceptable under the ACL, as are receipt or confirmation numbers for online orders.

A retailer might want further detail, if a card statement isn't itemised, for example. They may be able to reprint your receipt or look up your details in store records to find the purchase transaction matching your record.

If you don't have a receipt, there are a number of options when it comes to proof of purchase

You could also find that if you try to return an item you've received, it may have been discounted in the post-Christmas sales, and if you don't have a receipt, the shop has no proof that it wasn't bought at the discounted price. You may end up with credit for the sale price, not the full price – which might make it worth having a slightly awkward conversation with the giver first.

Receipt deceit

A receipt from the store, whether printed or handwritten, is still the best and easiest way to prove that an item was bought there, should you need to do so.

It's increasingly common for receipts to be printed on thermal paper, which is coated with a special chemical that darkens when heated and thus doesn't require ink. But as a recent CHOICE investigation (see *CHOICE*, Apr 13 or **choice.com.au/fadedreceipts**) showed, receipts printed on this material aren't as permanent as those printed with ink. The chemical layer remains active, so the text can fade with time or poor storage, and a thermal receipt left in a hot car on a summer day might even turn solid black! The store is under no explicit legal obligation to ensure your receipt lasts, and nor are they obliged to accept the faded receipt as proof of purchase if the relevant information isn't legible. It's a good idea to keep all your hard copy receipts in the one place (a paper envelope is best, as thermal receipts fade faster if stored in plastic) rather than leaving them scattered among individual store bags. The ACCC has an app – ACCC Shopper – that will allow you to photograph your receipts and save them straight to your smartphone. You could also scan or photocopy receipts to ensure you'll always have a hard copy.

And there's one particular returns myth that just won't die, explains CHOICE Consumer Rights Adviser Meredith Cridland.

"If the store tells you that you need the original packaging to return a faulty item – you don't! But if you are returning something because you've changed your mind, whether they will agree to a refund depends on the store's policy, and they probably will want it in the original packaging so they can re-sell it."

Buying online? Three-quarters of Australians who use the internet have made a purchase online. While delivery times mean it might require a little more forward planning than shopping at physical stores, the range of products is unbeatable. But as our online shadow shop showed last year (see *CHOICE*, Jul 13), online returns can be as inconvenient as online ordering is handy.

We recommend that you do your online gift shopping early so you have time to deal with any issues that might arise, only use payment methods (such as PayPal or a credit card) that offer some buyer protection if your package turns up damaged or not at all, and always check the security certificate when paying online.

Quick tips for stress-free shopping and returning

KEEP ALL YOUR RECEIPTS TOGETHER: Put all of your receipts in one place at home, and make copies of the receipts for any big-ticket purchases.

THERMAL-PAPER RECEIPTS: Don't keep them in plastic sleeves, use paperclips or staples rather than tape to attach them to other documents, and keep them away from heat.

MAKE LISTS AND CHECK THEM TWICE: It sounds obvious, but starting your gift shopping or bargain hunting with a clear list of what you want to buy and your budget can keep you on track.

KEEP THE BOX: If you're not sure a gift will be just right, try and keep the packaging as intact as possible. If it's faulty, you don't need the original packaging, but if you're hoping for a change-of-mind refund or exchange, pristine packaging will help your case.

DO YOUR RESEARCH: Just because an item is on sale, doesn't mean you're going to get the best price. Check prices for the product you want instore and online before buying.

KNOW YOUR RIGHTS: A 2013 CHOICE shadow shop of electronics retailers showed that retail staff aren't always given proper training in the Australian Consumer Law. This is particularly relevant in December and January, when many stores hire extra casuals, often just for a few weeks. If they tell you something that's not correct, even if it's "store policy" – that you need the original receipt to obtain an exchange, for example – you can politely let them know what your rights are under the ACL, or ask to speak to their manager or supervisor. The same goes for an extended warranty – ask what protections it provides beyond your rights under the ACL.

START WITH A SMILE: If you're returning an item that isn't faulty, it'll often be up to the sales assistant or manager's discretion whether you can exchange or return that extra blender or novelty tie. If you're a beacon of politeness and goodwill during the busiest shopping season of the year, you might find stressed-out staff are a little more willing to help you out.

Avoid sales fails

Even if you're not keen enough to line up outside Myer or David Jones at dawn, it's all too easy to get caught up in the post-Christmas sale madness – and come home with gadgets and gizmos you didn't need for a price you couldn't resist. Before you begin, make a list of products you really need (and, if budget allows, ones you wouldn't mind picking up if the price is right).

Many retailers send out catalogues and flyers, allowing you to compare discounts before you hit the shops. Whether you're at home or instore considering a purchase, checking out online sellers or the websites for bricks-and-mortar stores, or even just calling around to check prices, can snag you a bigger saving than being first in line when the roller doors open.

Don't be pressured into buying an extended warranty for your discounted electronics or appliances – even if it's still a great bargain with the extra cost added on. Extended warranties or store "care" schemes that cost extra rarely offer more protection than the ACL does for free.

And even if you pay cash to get a better price, a business must always provide you with a receipt for purchases over $75, and must provide you with one for any smaller purchases within seven days if you ask for it.

Some stores may have "No refunds on sale items" signs around the counter, or sales assistants may even tell you before you make the purchase that you can't return something you're buying on sale. Under the ACL, this isn't allowed – if you buy a discounted item that turns out to be faulty or isn't fit for purpose, you are still entitled to a refund if the fault wasn't disclosed or obvious before you bought it. ■

MORE ADVICE, INFO AND HELP

Check out the **Your consumer rights page** on the CHOICE website for more information: **choice.com.au/yourrights**

For more information on the ACL and your rights, visit consumerlaw.gov.au or accc.gov.au/consumers

A spot of bother

Acne can be painful, unsightly and self-esteem destroying. **Zoya Sheftalovich** finds out what causes it and the treatments that are available

85%
Percentage of Australians affected by acne

5%
Percentage of Australians affected by very severe acne

Acne doesn't just affect your looks – breakouts can damage self-esteem and impact on your quality of life. While sufferers are often told they'll just grow out of it, some never do, continuing to experience acne into their 40s. And there's generally no hiding it.

"Patients who have acne often have self-esteem and self-worth that is severely affected," says Dr Jo-Ann See, dermatologist and co-chair of acne advisory group All About Acne. "Acne is so common. Because it affects your face it can't be hidden, it's very obvious. And it may not just last a week or a month, it can go on for years, fluctuating in intensity."

The good news is there are effective treatments out there to help most acne sufferers – you just need to know where to look. But there's also bad news: with so much misinformation around, the myths blend with the facts, meaning those with acne often suffer needlessly when a solution could be simple, inexpensive and effective.

"There is safe, effective treatment out there, and there are so many treatment options that can be tailored individually for each patient," says Dr See. "But often people want a quick fix, and they're bombarded with advertising that promises results that are unrealistic, or they're confused by misinformation."

What causes acne?

Skin produces sebum, which is normally a good thing – it keeps your skin moisturised and helps maintain a healthy population of bacteria. But hormonal surges, which are particularly rife during adolescence but can happen later too, cause the skin to produce excess sebum, blocking pores.

If the blockage of dead skin cells and sebum stays below the skin, you get a whitehead. If the blockage reaches the air, it turns dark and becomes a blackhead. When bacteria gets into the surrounding tissue, it can become ▸

IMAGE: SHUTTERSTOCK

inflamed, with small red bumps (papules), white or yellow pus-filled pimples (pustules), or large red bumps (inflamed nodules).

Some people are genetically predisposed to acne. Stress has also been linked to acne, as have hormonal conditions such as polycystic ovary syndrome. Acne can be caused or aggravated by oil-based cosmetics, sunscreens or creams, hot and humid environments, working with oil and grease, and some medications, including steroids, certain contraceptive pills and some epilepsy treatments.

Who gets acne?

Almost all teenagers get acne to varying degrees. It typically starts around puberty and mainly affects the face, upper back and chest. Teenage boys are particularly susceptible to more severe acne, due to increasing levels of male hormones, or androgens, such as testosterone. Androgens are hormones that contribute to growth and reproduction in men and women. Though they're generally thought of as male hormones, women also naturally produce a small amount of androgens.

Dr See says: "An increased amount of testosterone really drives oil flow. Teenage boys often suffer worse acne as a result." And while acne generally becomes less problematic after the age of 25, some people never grow out of it.

Adult acne

Adult acne typically affects women from age 25 and into their 40s – it's becoming more common. "It's well documented that adult acne has increased compared to decades ago. We're not sure if it's to do with more stress or perhaps women having children later," says Dr See.

One of the causes of adult acne, particularly for women, is hormonal fluctuations.

"Typically, women will have a flare-up of breakouts with their period or stress," says Dr See. "Sometimes this will be due to the fact that the woman's usual androgen levels are high, which stimulates the oil gland."

When it comes to acne in adult men, Dr See says their genes are likely to be the culprits. "Adult acne is more of an issue for women, but when we do see it in men in their 30s and 40s, they often have a family history of really bad acne."

How can acne be treated?

Acne can be treated in a variety of different ways and differing treatments will vary in effectiveness depending on individual factors. "We use treatments in different ways and sometimes combine them," says Dr See. "A lot depends on whether the patient has mild, moderate or severe acne."

However, there are some treatments that, while seemingly high-tech, don't currently have evidence to back them, says Dr See.

"There are several treatments that aren't widely accepted. With photodynamic therapy, for example, you apply a photosensitising cream, then administer a light treatment. It doesn't always work and it's not a first line treatment."

Top six acne myths

Chocolate causes acne

Despite the myths, studies have found no direct connection between acne and chocolate, and dietary factors only affect a minority of acne sufferers.

"We grew up with stories about chocolate. But blaming chocolate for acne is also simplistic: it's based on anecdote rather than evidence. There have been studies in which chocolate was substituted with chocolate-like products to see if it led to acne, and it makes no difference," says Dr See.

"Some people will think 'I ate chocolate and now my acne is worse'. But they could be eating chocolate because they are looking for comfort food, so it could be due to emotional issues or stress, which we know can have an impact on acne."

However, researchers have found a possible link between acne and high glycaemic index (GI) foods, such as white bread. "It's really about the interaction between diet and hormones. A high-GI diet stimulates insulin production, which then affects your hormones," Dr See says. There's also a potential that being overweight causes a change in metabolism and hormonal fluctuations, which stimulate the oil gland. But the link between diet and acne is full of controversy and is still being explored."

And having a good diet doesn't guarantee good skin. "I often see people with a fantastic diet, but they still have acne," says Dr See.

Vitamins and supplements cure acne

Don't waste your money on costly supplements and vitamins that promise the world but don't deliver. "I recently had a patient who was offered a whole lot of supplements, and she was told to take them despite not having any results," says Dr See. "Now supplements and vitamins won't generally hurt you, but there's

no scientific basis for using them to treat acne, and they can be very expensive. If you are given a treatment and you don't see results after eight to 12 weeks, you should seek an alternative."

Acne is caused by bad hygiene

Another pernicious myth that can lead to stigma for acne suffers and can even make acne worse: some claim acne-prone skin is dirty skin. Not true, says Dr See. "Too much scrubbing of your skin can further irritate the skin and trigger inflammation – you can't wash acne away. It's the worst myth in my opinion. Parents will tell their children 'you're not washing your face enough'. They see blackheads and think they're dirt. But they're not dirt. They're open pores where the skin is oxidised. It's like when you cut a potato and it goes a bit brown where the air gets to it."

Acne is caused by using cheap products

CHOICE believes a high price tag is not necessarily a guarantee of quality. The same is true of personal care products, says Dr See. Just because a cleanser is made by one of the French beauty powerhouses, that does not mean it will give you supermodel-like skin.

"Many people think acne is caused by using cheap products. Some of my patients confess to using something cheap, thinking that this is the problem. But an inexpensive product can be just as good," she says.

Acne is linked to sexual activity

You might've heard from a friend that acne is either cleared up by sex or caused by it. And it's easy to see why the confusion may arise – acne is related to hormones, and there's nothing more hormonal than sex. But again, Dr See says this myth just isn't borne out by the evidence.

"It's amazing what people say! One of the funniest things I've come across is regarding acne being linked to sex – both too much and not enough. It's a silly myth, there is no correlation."

Popping pimples is a good idea

While it can be satisfying to pop a juicy whitehead or release a steadfast blackhead, Dr See recommends against it. "Popping pimples feels fantastic, but what you're doing is rupturing the pilosebaceous duct. You're getting rid of the core of the pimple, but you create more inflammation, which contributes to scarring," she says.

"Squeezing pores also isn't really helpful as they just re-form – it's just a short-term benefit. And you definitely shouldn't do it if it's very painful, because that could be rupturing the follicle."

Mild to moderate acne

Mild acne can be treated with over-the-counter antibacterial skin products, such as benzoyl peroxide. Don't overuse these, as you can irritate the skin further. They can stop the growth of bacteria and some, but not all, are designed to clean your skin right down into the pores. Benzoyl peroxide is safe for adults and children, and can be used during pregnancy. However, it can dry and irritate the skin so it's often useful to start with a low concentration.

Mild to moderate acne can also be treated with topical retinoids and antibiotics, which require a prescription. Topical retinoids like tretinoin, isotretinoin and adapalene are used to treat whiteheads and blackheads, and prevent the formation of new ones. They're derived from vitamin A and cause the skin to peel, unblocking your pores. But they do have a range of side effects and should not be used by pregnant women. Retinoids can also irritate the skin and increase its sensitivity to the sun, so you should use plenty of sunscreen during the day – making sure it's not too thick, to avoid causing more pimples.

One of the causes of adult acne, particularly for women, is hormonal fluctuations

Topical antibiotics such as clindamycin and erythromycin work by reducing acne bacteria on the skin. They may cause dry or scaly skin and erythromycin may also give an itching, stinging or burning feeling.

Moderate to severe acne

For those with moderate to severe acne, or in cases where the other treatments don't work, a GP may prescribe oral antibiotics or, for women, the oral contraceptive pill.

Teenagers tend to stick to oral antibiotic treatments more than to topical antibiotics, which can take a long time to apply. Typically, oral antibiotics are prescribed for between three and six months to help avoid antibiotic resistance. But due to their higher potential for serious side effects, they tend to be reserved for more serious acne cases.

IMAGE: SHUTTERSTOCK

The oral contraceptive pill lowers androgen levels in the body, decreasing the production of sebum. Several brands of the pill have been shown to be effective at treating acne, but some can actually aggravate it. Ask your doctor to prescribe the right one to take to treat acne, and to explain the potential side effects if you're a suitable candidate.

Stubborn acne may require specialist intervention from a dermatologist, which will require a referral from your GP.

Isotretinoin (Roaccutane)

Pills containing isotretinoin (a retinoid sold by prescription under brand names including Roaccutane, Oratane, Isohexal and Accure) have been shown to be very effective at treating acne by attacking all its contributing causes. It reduces the amount of sebum made by the glands in your skin, reduces acne bacteria and inflammation, and opens clogged pores. However, there are potential links to some worrying side effects, including depression and birth defects, so it's not suitable for women who are planning to have a baby or are pregnant.

"Usage of this medication is controversial, but it has been prescribed for over 25 years. Prescribing it comes down to patient selection and monitoring," says Dr See. "It is well known that effective acne treatment increases patient wellbeing and quality of

Stubborn acne may require specialist intervention

life, however, some patients may develop mood changes and even depression. All patients need to be monitored for this, but it is not a common event."

The way in which isotretinoin is prescribed has changed over the years with the development of variable dose regimens. Patients are usually prescribed a low starting dose that is then slowly escalated over a few months to minimise side effects. ■

Better skin routine

Wash your face twice a day with water and a mild soap or cleanser, and pat it dry

Use oil-free or 'non-comedogenic' skin-care products and make-up

Use heavier cleanser and moisturiser in winter, and lighter products in summer

If you're using an acne treatment and it hasn't worked after three months, ask your GP for an alternative

Pep talk for professionals

In this unregulated profession, how do you tell the coaches from the cowboys? **Karina Bray** investigates

Life coaches these days are springing up everywhere, with plenty of training courses also capitalising on the rapidly growing industry. While in some circles they're all the rage, the rest of us may be wondering what the fuss is about. So just what is life coaching, what do coaches do, and how do you find a good one?

What is life coaching?

In a nutshell, "the role of life coaching is to identify personally meaningful goals, as well as strategies to achieve them – whether it's re-energising yourself and your career, setting up a business, or meeting some health goal," says Dr Anthony Grant, director of the Coaching Psychology Unit at the University of Sydney.

Jenny Devine is president elect of the International Coach Federation (ICF) Australasia, a professional association for coaches, including life coaches. She sees the role of the coaching process as helping an individual to create a vision of where they want to go in their life, supporting them, and helping them to find the strategies they need to get where they want or need to go.

> "It's not a hierarchical relationship where we tell you what to do"

Devine emphasises the collaborative process of hiring a life coach, pointing to the ICF's definition of coaching, which is: "Partnering with clients in a thought-provoking and creative process that inspires them to maximise their personal and professional potential."

"It's absolutely what we're about," she explains. "It's a partnership, where we work together. It's not a hierarchical relationship, where we [the coach] tell you what to do."

What it's not

Coaching is not therapy, and life coaches aren't necessarily trained to deal with mental health issues. If there are major psychological issues holding you back – such as anxiety, depression or distressing events from your past – speaking to a psychologist would be more appropriate. Similarly, if there are dysfunctional patterns in your work or personal life that keep occurring, a psychologist may be better able to help you resolve these.

While several life coaches may have a background in psychology, specialist coaching psychologists offer the best of both worlds, being highly trained in both areas to better enable them to offer the right advice and guidance for people in need of additional help.

IMAGE: SHUTTERSTOCK

An ethically minded life coach will identify when they're out of their depth and refer the client to a psychologist or other mental health professional.

The other major misconception about life coaches is that they give advice and tell you what you should do. If this is what you need, a business consultant, a personal trainer or a mentor might suit you better. Life coaches are trained to get *you* to identify what it is you want and how you might achieve that.

What aspects of life do they coach you in?

Many life coaches choose to specialise in a particular area, depending on their own particular interests and expertise. As they are often embarking on a second or third career as a coach, or coaching as a sideline to their main career, they may have extensive experience in their specialty area.

Some of the specialties are as follows:

- Executive coaching can help with time-management skills, motivation, managing stress, encouraging innovative thinking, leadership skills and achieving work–life balance.
- Business coaching is for business owners looking for strategies to establish, grow and/or adapt their business and helps with goal setting, motivation and stress management.
- Workplace coaching tends to be implemented organisationally, and focuses on individual and team performance, motivation, team building, change management and specific workplace problems.
- Career coaching can help people with career changes and with transition – whether voluntary or forced via redundancy or sacking – or re-entering the workforce. It can also help identify personal strengths, interests and motivations relevant to job satisfaction.
- Health and wellness coaching can help people identify and change lifestyle patterns that have a negative effect on health, looking at nutrition, exercise, stress and work-life balance.
- Life cycle or life stages coaching addresses changes or transitions associated with particular stages of life, for example changes in family structure, career changes, and changes in an individual's sense of purpose.
- Relationship coaching addresses issues that affect the ability to have successful relationships.

The main areas of coaching in Australia are executive, leadership and business coaching.

What are their credentials?

One of the biggest bugbears among industry professionals is the lack of regulation of life coach credentials and qualifications. As it stands, anyone can call themselves a life coach, with little or no specific training in coaching. For consumers wanting to employ a life coach, qualifications and membership of a professional organisation are important indicators of the person's coaching credentials.

Qualifications

At one end of the qualification scale (assuming they've had any training at all) is a "Certified Life Coach." We found an online course for only US$69.99, "which could take you from 1 week to a month" to complete and at the end you get an official-looking logo and can "display the credentials 'Certified Life Coach' on all your business correspondence."

Credentials, maybe. But credibility? Not so much.

At the other end is Masters level postgraduate training through university-level psychology schools, which takes two years full time, following the minimum three years for a relevant undergraduate degree. In between are Certificate IV, Diploma and Bachelor's degree qualifications.

Many life coaches will have additional qualifications – psychology, counselling, health sciences, business and marketing are typical – which increase their expertise in these areas.

Professional membership

The main professional association for life coaches in Australia is ICF Australasia. Other associations include the Asia Pacific Alliance of Coaches (APAC), the International Association of Coaching and the Association for Coaching.

Members of these organisations have to meet certain skills, training and experience requirements, and must have a recognised qualification in life coaching. They also have to abide by a code of ethics, which gives clients some recourse if the coach has acted unethically (see Complaints, p35).

ICF operates internationally with cross-border jurisdiction, which is useful in the digital age where clients can be coached by someone overseas.

Level of training and experience

ICF offers different levels of credentials, depending on the amount of training and experience the coach has. Associate

The other major misconception about life coaches is that they give advice and tell you what to do

Finding a life coach

If you've decided a life coach could be helpful to you, your next step is to find one. Apart from word of mouth or searching online for 'life coach', the ICF Australasia website has a database: **icfaustralasia.com/FindACoach.php**

What to look for

- First and foremost, it's important that you feel comfortable with the coach, and that you can trust them. When you meet the coach for the first time, how well do you click? Do you understand each other?
- What are the coach's life coaching credentials? Do they have other qualifications, and what relevant experience do they have? Also, what's their specialty area?
- Are they a member of either the ICF or another professional association (see Professional membership, left)?
- What sort of interaction do they use? Some coaches do only face-to-face coaching (or may do so initially), some do Skype, VoIP, telephone or email coaching, and some do a mixture of methods.
- Is the coach readily available and do they encourage you to contact them? How quickly can they get back to you via telephone or email? 24/7 access isn't realistic, but you don't want to be waiting days for a response.
- Consider overseas coaches. With easy access via Skype and other communication options, it could be worth considering, especially in highly specialised areas. It could even be preferable for some, when taking time differences into account.

coach is the starting point, followed by professional coach, then master coach.

These certification levels should be considered in the context of other qualifications and experience. For example, a psychologist or business consultant who's an associate coach might have only the minimum of coaching experience, but a wealth of professional experience and expertise to draw on. It is definitely a good idea to look for some level of accreditation with one of the main professional associations though, when considering a life coach, even if only so you will have an avenue of recourse should something go wrong.

What happens in coaching?

Starting with an initial meeting, where the issues confronting the client are discussed and the scope of coaching is established, some early priorities and desired outcomes are established. This may include setting some short-term goals as well as longer-term ones.

Coaching tends to work pretty quickly – after a couple of sessions you should feel a sense of progress

The theoretical underpinnings of the approach used varies according to the training and background of the coach, but all are based on a solution-focused, goal-directed process that leads towards achieving insight and actionable plans.

According to Jenny Devine, coaching tends to work pretty quickly, and after a couple of sessions you should be feeling a sense of progress. Meetings may take place regularly or on an as-needed basis, and while it very much depends on the particular situation, Devine suggests that six to 12 sessions is about the average number required, though some coaching may go on for years.

How much does it cost?

A survey conducted on behalf of ICF found that the average hourly rate for life coaching was around $300. Coaching costs which are related to an individual earning income – for example, executive coaching or leadership skills – may be tax deductible though.

$300
Average hourly cost for a life coaching session

Complaints resolution

Despite consumer concerns about the lack of industry regulation and the qualifications of people calling themselves 'life coaches,' there are surprisingly few complaints made about life coaches.

Dr Grant puts this down partly to the clients, pointing out that most people are pretty resilient even in the face of things going wrong. However, life coaches do generally act ethically, and don't go beyond their professional boundaries – that is, they're helping people find their own solutions rather than advising them.

Fiona Toy, spokesperson for ICF, agrees. She also adds that most of the complaints they have received have been about life coaches who aren't members of ICF, which means the ICF can't take action.

If clients do have a complaint about a life coach, they should contact the professional organisation to which the coach belongs – which is in itself a good reason to look for a coach with ICF or professional membership. ■

IMAGE: SHUTTERSTOCK

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IMAGE: THINKSTOCK

Searching for love online

Online dating sites are a virtual supermarket of potential partners, but it pays to read the fine print before falling head over heels, writes **Zoya Sheftalovich**

Online dating sites are rapidly springing up to cater to any number of predilections: from long-term relationships to casual encounters, and even extramarital affairs. But when it comes to finding love online, not everything smells like roses.

The Australian Competition and Consumer Commission (ACCC) recently announced it would investige online dating sites as part of a world-wide effort to crack down on misleading offers, unclear pricing, contracts with unfair terms and sites lacking protections for consumers against scams.

"Online dating sites have proven to be a popular forum to meet someone special and we're reminding this booming industry to treat customers in a fair and transparent manner," says ACCC deputy chair Delia Rickard.

The ACCC is also continuing a national crackdown on online dating scams as part of its "Scams Disruption Project" (for more on these scams see *CHOICE,* Oct 14 or **choice.com.au/scams2014**). Romance scammers are using increasingly sophisticated methods to trick victims into parting with their money, including "long cons" that can involve "relationships" spanning months or years before a request for money is made.

"Unfortunately the ACCC continues to hear the devastating impact of dating and romance scams, with over $16 million reported in financial losses and nearly 1700 complaints already this year," says Rickard.

CHOICE's latest investigation compares three online dating sites, Plenty of Fish, Tinder and Zoosk, on their approach, cost, privacy policies and terms and conditions. Consumers agree to a host of troubling terms and potential privacy invasions, which consumers automatically agree to with just a quick click.

Plenty of Fish (PoF)

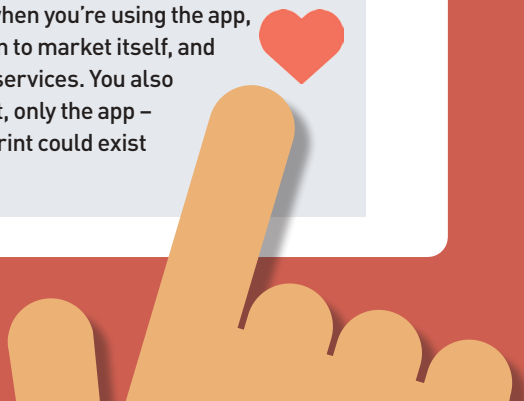
Australian members: Information could not be provided.
Who's on it? The site skews slightly towards more male users, with an average of age 32.
Cost: A free membership allows users to post up to eight photos, communicate with others, view others' photos, and use most of the site's features. You can upgrade your membership for additional features such as the ability to upload up to 16 images, unlock any user's extended profile, see if your emails were read or deleted, find out when someone viewed your profile, go ad-free and appear first in search results. The upgrade costs $10.18 per month on an eight-month plan, $12.75 a month on a four-month plan, and $19.35 per month on a two-month plan. Bear in mind that unless you specifically opt out, your subscription will automatically renew.

Approach: Upon signing up with PoF, you fill out a profile listing your preferences for a potential significant other, and can choose to fill out a so-called "Relationship Chemistry Predictor". PoF then sends you a report based on your survey responses, and uses the data to match you to others on the site.
Privacy: PoF says it may share your personal information with affiliates and third parties acting on their behalf in the "normal course of business", though they do say they won't sell it to others.

Tinder

Australian members: There is no Australian user data, but we are Tinder's third-largest market, after the US and UK.
Who's on it? Tinder has a 55 per cent male to 45 per cent female user base. It skews younger, with 50 per cent of users aged 18-24, 34 per cent aged 25-34, and 8 per cent aged 35-44.
Cost: Tinder is entirely free.
Approach: Tinder is an app-based online dating service for use on your smartphone or tablet device. You must sign up with your Facebook account to use the app, which then forms the basis of your Tinder profile. According to Tinder, this is to ensure matches are made with real people who share interests and common friends. Tinder doesn't post to your Facebook profile, so your Facebook friends won't see your activity on Tinder.
Here's how it works: You pick the gender(s) you're interested in, what age range you're looking for, and how close in distance you'd like a potential match to be. Tinder then uses your smartphone's GPS to search for nearby app users – showing you their first name, age and a profile picture. You swipe right if you're interested, left if you're not. If both parties swipe right, you're a match and the interaction begins.

According to a spokesperson: "The purpose of Tinder is social discovery. All we are doing is facilitating an introduction between two people who are interested in getting to know each other better. Our users are leveraging Tinder to form relationships in the context of friendship, dating, getting recommendations from locals while traveling and even business networking."
Privacy: Privacy is a significant concern, as users sign up with their Facebook profile – Tinder has access to your personal information, such as your email address, likes, birthday, education, relationships, location, personal description, your friends list, and your photos. Tinder can also access your chats when you're using the app, and uses this information to market itself, and third-party products or services. You also can't delete your account, only the app – your virtual Tinder footprint could exist in perpetuity.



Zoosk

Australian members: Zoosk has approximately 13.5 million members outside of the US, though a spokesperson couldn't tell CHOICE how many were Australian.
Who's on it? With an equal split between men and women, members are typically aged in their late 20s and early 30s.
Cost: Free members can create a profile, search, and send introductory winks and messages. Paid memberships start from $12.49 per month on a six-month membership to $29.95 a month, paid monthly. Memberships auto-renew unless you cancel your membership before it expires. Paid members can send and receive messages and winks, chat, see profiles of those who have viewed yours, and get full access to Smartpick, Zoosk's matching services.

You can also earn or buy Zoosk "Coins", which unlock your matches, allow you to send virtual gifts, and boost your profile, among other features. Coins cost from $19.95 for 180, up to $99.95 for 1800 coins. They can also be earned by using third-party apps, surveys and websites.
Approach: To sign up to Zoosk you fill out a profile, usually by signing up with Facebook, and then you can choose to fill out an extensive compatibility survey. You can meet singles by searching for them, using the "Carousel" (similar to Tinder) or using SmartPick (which evaluates compatibility and makes match recommendations). Zoosk claims to learn from your actions as you use the site, therefore making more suitable matches.

Zoosk offers a photo verification service for those who access the service using their iPhone or iPad app. Moderators can add a verified logo on your profile picture for extra security.
Privacy: If you sign up to Zoosk and give the site access to one of your social media profiles, such as Twitter or Facebook, they may make posts on your behalf on that platform. Think twice about giving Zoosk access to your address book – they keep your contacts on file and may later use your information to suggest friends and connections to other members. By signing up to Zoosk, you grant permission for all your user content to be used for purposes including advertising or transmission to a third party.

How to stay safe on online dating sites

Before you sign up for an online dating service, consider the following:

- Read the terms and conditions so you know what you're signing up to and how much it will cost.
- Check your options for cancelling the contract before signing up.
- Set reminders in your phone or diary to cancel your subscription to avoid inadvertently rolling over for a further term.
- Create a separate email address for online dating.
- Never include personal information such as your real name, workplace, work or home address, phone number or birthday, in your profile.
- Do a reverse Google image search on photos of their profiles to check for authenticity.
- When you meet somebody for the first time, pick a public place, tell a friend where you're going and keep the first meeting brief and inexpensive, such as grabbing a cup of coffee.
- Don't let somebody new pick you up or drop you at home.
- Never send money to someone you've only ever contacted online or over the phone.

Mature matches

While not just an online dating site, **Stitch** helps older adults find companionship for travel, romance and general company. It's been very recently launched by the team behind Tapestry, a private social network for older adults. As the site is still very new to Australia (despite being an Australian company, most of its business is in the US), at this point only free memberships are on offer here.

Aside from catering to a mature market, Stitch's point of difference is the emphasis it places on safety and security. One of the services provided is verification of members' names, addresses and/or photos, with one-off costs starting at $5.

How to get the most out of online dating

Like any other way of meeting people, internet dating doesn't come with guarantees. If you'd like to try dating people this way, make sure you stay in the driver's seat: don't share personal information in a public profile, talk for a while online before you meet in person, and block any communications that make you uncomfortable.

Most major online dating sites try to protect you from breaching your own privacy by posting identifying details on your online profile. For this reason, you often won't be able to post a profile that contains, among other things, personal information (full name, email, telephone, web address), mention of illegal activities, discriminatory (racist, sexist, homophobic, ageist) text, or solicitation or any commercial activity.

Read more

For our review of additional online dating sites, including RSVP, eHarmony, OkCupid and OasisActive, head to choice.com.au/onlinedating

Profiles generally contain information about age, hobbies, likes and dislikes, the general area a person lives and a photo.

Tips

These tips can help you make a profile that reels in potential dates:

- Profiles with photos receive more responses.
- Tell the truth in your profile – you and your dates will only be disappointed if you've lied.
- Be original and try to make your profile stand out from the rest.
- Don't rush in – spend time getting to know somebody online and ask plenty of questions before you meet them face to face. ■

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Got a niggling question our team can help with?

Q We recently bought a microwave after reading your report and found that it was a great microwave to use. But it failed, much sooner than I expected. My question is do you take quality into account in your tests?

A CHOICE home and living team lead Chris Barnes replies: While we can't test the long-term durability of most products in our labs, we do report on the reliability of brands in general. Every year CHOICE surveys thousands of our members, asking them to let us know how reliable they've found the products they've bought. We then share the results to help you find which brands are built to last and which will cost you in the long run. You can find our most recent survey results in *CHOICE* Apr 14 or at **choice.com.au/brandreliability**

We last surveyed microwaves in 2013, and you can find the most reliable brands according to our members – the

percentage of respondents who didn't have any problems with their machine in the last 12 months – as well as the microwave brands with the highest customer loyalty – those who say they'd buy that brand again.

Q I have a question about using Google Chrome on my laptop, on which I am operating Windows 8.1. When I open Google Chrome, an Amazon Smart Search message pops up on the screen. It is not listed in any program that I can uninstall, so I don't know where to search for a tool to get rid of the message on my laptop.

A CHOICE technology journalist Ros Page replies: These browser hijackers are a type of malware that can be inadvertently included when downloading free programs. There are several ways to remove this (and other annoying things, such as the Ask toolbar or unwanted search programs).

If you can't remove it through the Programs and Features uninstall tool, then try and remove it from Chrome. Click the customise icon (the three horizontal bars) and go to Settings and then Extensions and remove any associated with malware. Then go to Settings, followed by Manage search engines and remove anything that isn't wanted.

There are also some suggestions on safebro.com/remove-amazon-smartsearch to remove the Amazon Smart Search malware.

A free program such as Revo Uninstaller (download it from revouninstaller.com) could help get rid of unwanted programs and their associated files. ■

Ask us!

Do you have a question for one of CHOICE's experts? Email us at **asktheexperts@choice.com.au** or write to us at:
Ask the Experts, CHOICE,
57 Carrington Rd, Marrickville,
NSW 2204.
We regret that we cannot reply to all correspondence.

Q I've noticed that packets of OMO laundry detergent are labelled as being for either top-loading or front-loading machines. What is the difference and is it important?

A CHOICE whitegoods team lead Matthew Steen replies: A detergent specifically made for top loaders used in a front loader or a high-efficiency (HE) top-loading machine will create too many suds. The foam builds up between the outer drum wall and the inner drum of the washer, and can create a suction issue, causing the motor to burn out. This is called "suds lock".

If you want to use a top-loader detergent, say from a previously owned machine, use a lot less of it (a quarter dose). If you bought top loader detergent accidentally, you're better off exchanging it for the right version.

You can generally use a front-loader or HE detergent in a regular top loader without a problem.

COMPILED BY SIOBAHN DONOHOE

Tests

Air conditioners, washing machines, tablets, cameras and more – we help you shop smart

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How to be one cool customer

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We find the best buys to keep you cool this summer

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For budget air options and temporary cooling solutions

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Will Apple once again take the biggest piece of the tech pie?

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Get the full picture on the gear you need for your next trip

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They heat, cook, even grill – but is that worth the price?

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See what makes the A-grade when it comes to single-use

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Get with the program and get the most out of your next load

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CHOICE looks into mulchers and catchers to see what works best for you

Get the low down on the best from mow town, on page 71

IMAGE: SHUTTERSTOCK

CHOICE's Chris Barnes finds the grass is always greener

CHOICE

CHOICE'S experienced technical staff puts products through their paces in our own testing laboratories. We use test methods based on Australian standards and develop our own to match the way consumers use a product in their homes. We buy the products we test, maintaining our independence from manufacturers and so we know what you're faced with in the shops. We've checked the models are available at the time we publish. Our recommendations are based on a product's quality and performance, with no hidden bias.

CHOICE Shopper

Members who have subscribed to CHOICE through our website have access to the best deals on products wherever this logo appears. Simply have your CHOICE membership number on hand, the model name and number, and the price you have been quoted. Phone 1300 360 655 and we'll source you the best deal.

CHOICE Online

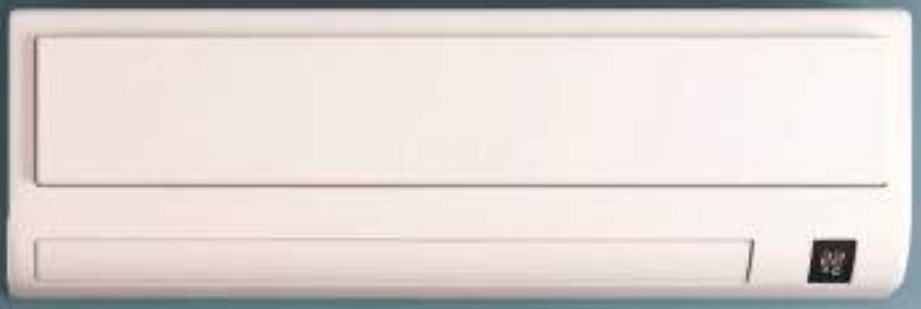
For more related information and articles on this topic, go to **choice.com.au**

CHOICE Best Buy

Our testers award a product a Best Buy if it delivers high quality at a comparatively low price. Not every test report includes Best Buys.

CHOICE Green Buy

Our researchers award a Green Buy to a product that delivers good quality and environmental performance. Not every test report includes Green Buys.



Cool customers

When it comes to which kind of air con will suit your situation, our experts have all the answers. They lay down the rules of cool in this handy guide.

On a sweaty summer day, there's nothing like pressing a button and transforming warm, still air into an icy-cool breeze. This guide will help you narrow down the options and find the best air conditioner for your home.

If you're a renter, a **portable model** is probably your best bet, as there's no need for installation and you can take it with you next time you move. For more efficient cooling, you're more likely looking at a **split-system inverter** model. But what does that mean, exactly? We explain the terminology below.

What kind of system do I want?

Let's decode some technical terms.

Split-system This type of air conditioner is made up of a compressor unit that's installed outside, and one or more indoor air outlets. They're usually used to cool down one or more rooms in a house, or an open-plan area of up to 60 square metres. **Price range:** $700-5000+

Wall/window These models are generally installed in a window or an external wall, and can cool rooms and open-plan areas of up to 50 square metres. Smaller units can be plugged into a normal power point; larger ones may need additional wiring. We don't currently include these models in our air conditioner reviews, because there are fewer of them on the market now than there used to be – split-systems are more efficient and have become considerably more affordable in recent years. **Price range:** $300-1000.

Inverter technology With conventional air conditioners, the compressor is either on (working to 100% capacity) or off. Inverters can vary the compressor speed and maintain the set temperature within a narrow range. They're generally more efficient and can cost less to run, although a good conventional model can still be cost-effective.

Cooling-only or reverse-cycle Reverse-cycle models don't cost much more than cooling-only models, and it's worth remembering that you can use them for heating in winter as well. While the upfront and installation costs can be high, reverse-cycle air conditioners are actually among the cheapest and most effective forms of heating for large spaces. They also cause less carbon dioxide to be produced in power plants burning fossil fuel than other kinds of electric heaters.

SIZING UP YOUR NEW AIR CON

It's important to get the cooling or heating capacity right when you're shopping for a new air conditioner. Use our cooling capacity calculator at **choice.com.au/coolingcalculator** to help you choose a model with **equal or slightly greater** capacity for the room. Models **too powerful** for the room may run frequent short cycles to get to target temperature – which is like tapping the accelerator in your car to maintain speed instead of applying steady pressure. This can result in poor dehumidification (making the room less comfortable), increased power use, and wear and tear on the system. **Underpowered models** may have to run more often at maximum, drying the air too much and also causing wear.

Other things to consider

Do you live in a very hot or cold region?

Each model has a **recommended outdoor temperature operating range**. Most can operate in temperatures from about -10°C up to about 45°C or more. This is OK for most parts of Australia, but check the air conditioner's operating range before you buy, to make sure it can cope with any extremes in your area. If the air conditioner doesn't have **automatic de-icing** and you live in a cold area, frost may build up on the outdoor heat exchanger coils in winter.

If you live in a hot and dry climate, an **evaporative cooler** can be a cheaper alternative to an air conditioner. Evaporative air coolers draw the hot air in and over a water reservoir. The water evaporates, absorbing heat from the air. The cooled, moist air is then blown back into the room. Evaporative coolers are generally more suitable for areas with low humidity.

Noise

A noisy indoor unit may interfere with your activities, conversation or sleep. On top of that, most local councils have noise restrictions relating to the use of air conditioners. **Check local regulations before buying**, especially if the outdoor unit needs to be installed close to your neighbour's house.

Features and functions

Fan speeds

The fan circulates cooled or heated air around the room. Look for a model with a wide airflow range and multiple fan speeds – from very high, to help the room cool down quickly, to very low, so there's less noise and no annoying draught once you have the right temperature.

Operating modes

- **Auto** Automatically chooses the mode required to keep the room at the chosen temperature.
- **Cool** Pumps heat from the inside to the outside.
- **Heat** Pumps heat from the outside to the inside.
- **Dry** Dehumidifies the air, while cooling only slightly.
- **Fan only** Blows air without heating, cooling or drying, which is useful when all you want is a cooling breeze.

Human presence sensor

This detects whether someone is actually in the room, so that the unit knows to keep working. Some models even direct the air movement towards the person, so as to not use excess energy to cool unoccupied parts of the room.

Remote control

Look for large, well-spaced buttons and a big, easy-to-read LCD screen.

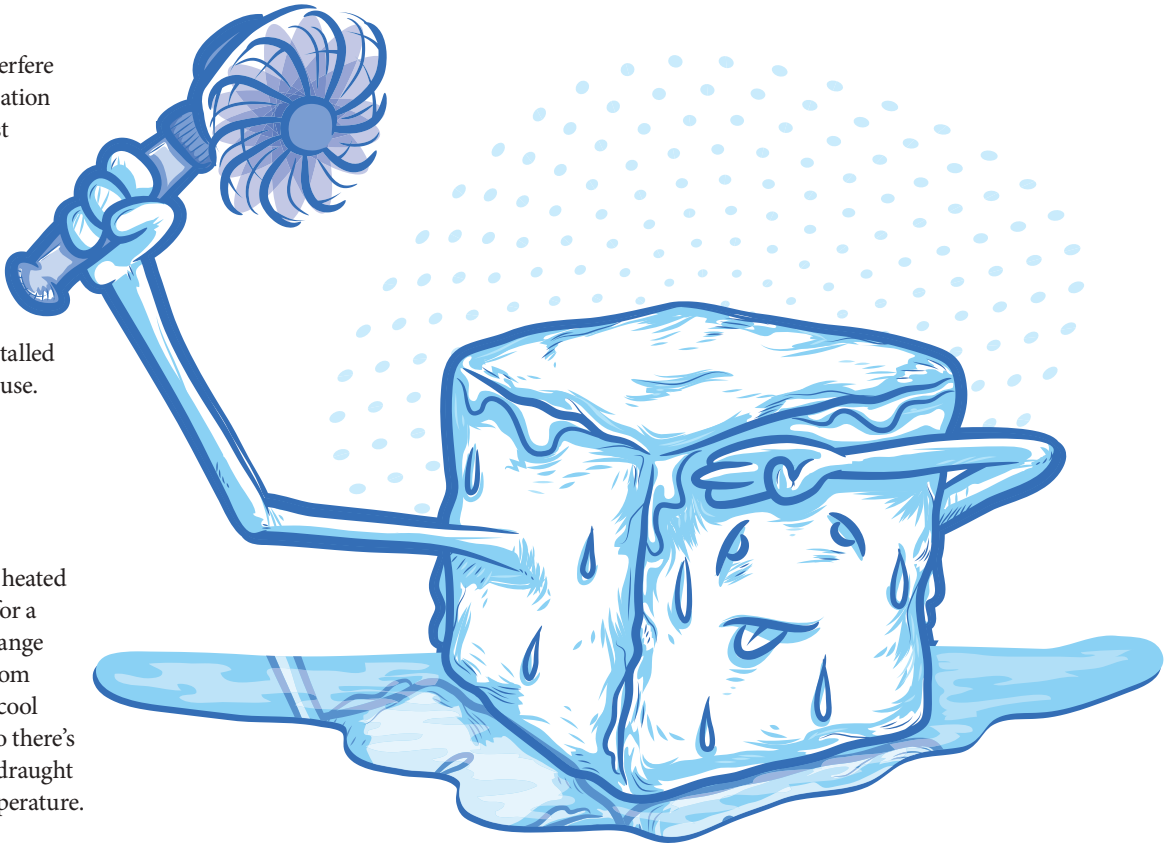


IMAGE: SHUTTERSTOCK

Keeping energy costs down

Star gazing

Once you've worked out what capacity you need, compare the star ratings of models of similar capacity. The more stars, the lower the running costs and greenhouse gas emissions. Note that star ratings are different for heating and cooling.

The government energy rating website (**energyrating.com.au**) has more information about the updated star rating system and the rules for air conditioners.

Restart delay

A protective feature that prevents the air conditioner from starting up again too soon after being switched off.

Demand Response Enabling Device

To help reduce household power consumption, many new air conditioner models now feature DREDs (Demand Response Enabling Devices), also known as PeakSmart.

DREDs allow participating energy companies to remotely control the air conditioner in periods of peak electricity demand – usually in high summer when everyone wants to cool their homes – reducing both the strain on the grid and your household power consumption, without greatly affecting the air conditioner's performance.

This service can go a long way toward reducing peak electricity demand and therefore the need for new infrastructure. That means savings are passed on to consumers.

So far, only a few energy companies provide the service, but it's set to become more common, particularly as smart metering becomes more widespread. Some energy companies also pay incentives to customers who buy DRED-enabled air conditioners.

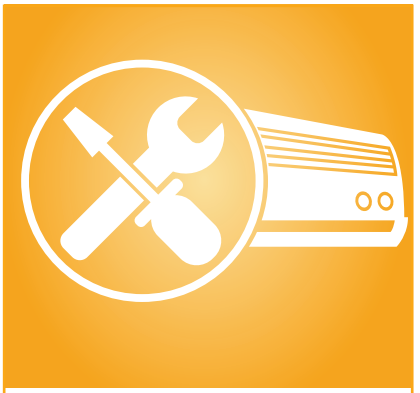
Ready to buy? Then check out our tests on the following pages to see the inverter air-conditioner (page 47) and portable models (page 51) that we recommend.

Sleep mode

This function adjusts, in steps, the temperature to a comfortable level for sleeping so the air conditioner doesn't work as hard (and is quieter) when you're sleeping.

Adjustable/ oscillating louvres

Point them up for cool air and down for warm. This can be done via the remote for most models. Left and right adjustability helps direct air where it's particularly needed.



Installation

Consider installation costs and requirements when you're shopping around. Here are some things to remember:

- Most traders offer supply-and-install packages, and some installation-only. **Installation must be done by a licensed installer** due to the handling of refrigerant gas involved. Look for an installer with ARCtick approval, and get a few quotes.
- **Cool air is heavier than warm air,** so for optimum cooling, the air outlet should be installed as close to the ceiling as possible, with the louvres pointing out horizontally, or up toward the ceiling. For heating, point the louvres downwards.
- It's generally better to install an air conditioner on a **longer wall** in a room, but whoever installs your unit should recommend the most suitable place for your individual situation.
- The outdoor unit of your **split system** needs to be installed on a firm base (a concrete slab for example) or attached to a wall with sturdy brackets, and as close as possible to the indoor outlet, preferably within 15m.
- **Shade** the outdoor part of your air conditioner from direct sunlight – for example, by installing it on a southern wall or adding an awning.

Stars in their eyes

New air conditioner models tend to have better star ratings, which is good news for consumers, says **Chris Barnes**

Cooling and heating can make up about 40 per cent of a home's energy usage, so it's no surprise that the running costs of air conditioners can be a significant part of your electricity bill. For several years now, split-system air conditioners have been required to meet Minimum Energy Performance Standards (MEPS) and been marked with star rating labels, in order to weed out the least efficient models and help consumers choose the best performers.

New MEPS regulations for air conditioners came into effect in April 2014, including multi-split systems for the first time (similar to split-systems, but with two or more indoor units connected to the outdoor unit).

The actual MEPS for single split-systems haven't changed, but thanks to improved cooling and/or heating efficiencies, several new models appear in our What to Buy list. That's because, even without new MEPS levels being set, a good star rating is a selling point and most manufacturers keep working to improve the efficiency of their models, regardless of legislated minimum performance levels.

As well as improved efficiency, many manufacturers aim to add new features. For example, a human presence sensor, which detects when someone is in the room so that the unit knows to keep cooling (or heating). Some models also direct the air movement towards the sensed person, so that they don't unnecessarily use energy to cool other sections. If no-one's detected, the unit reduces its cooling or heating output (often without switching off altogether), again to reduce energy usage. Examples include Panasonic's Econavi feature, Daikin's Intelligent Eye and Fujitsu's Human Sensor.

Nutshell

- We review more than 160 reverse-cycle, split-system air conditioners, priced from $729 to over $5000.
- The best models are highlighted here, and there are several new models listed. For the full list, go to **choice.com.au/airconditioners.**

IMAGE: SHUTTERSTOCK

WHAT TO BUY

These models score the best in their size categories. Each is very good overall, and good to excellent for cooling and heating efficiency. See the table for their particular scores and cooling and heating capacities.

In our 2014 member survey on appliance reliability, Daikin inspired the highest brand loyalty for air conditioners, with 98 per cent of respondents saying they'd buy this brand again. Other brands with excellent brand loyalty are Fujitsu, Mitsubishi Electric, Mitsubishi Heavy, Panasonic, Actron and Braemar.

Brands with excellent reliability (above 90 per cent) are Mitsubishi Electric, Daikin, Braemar, Fujitsu, Panasonic and Mitsubishi Heavy.

For LG, 82 per cent of respondents said they'd found the brand reliable, and 87 per cent said they'd buy it again. Their numbers aren't as high as those above, but they're still good and better than the 2012 survey, when only 79 per cent found LG air conditioners reliable.

SMALL (LESS THAN 4KW COOLING CAPACITY)

85% LG K09AWN-11	$880
84% Mitsubishi Heavy SRK20ZMXA-S	$946
81% LG P09AWN-14	$875
81% LG S09AWN-14	$794
81% LG W09AWN-14	$1348

MEDIUM (4KW TO 6KW)

87% LG P18AWN-14	$1275
87% LG S18AWN-14	$1219
87% LG W18AWN-14	$2048
82% Daikin FTXM50PVMA	$2099

LARGE (6.1KW AND OVER)

89% LG P24AWN-14	$1569
89% LG S24AWN-14	$1513
89% LG W24AWN-14	$2498
82% LG P28AWN-14	$1858
82% LG S28AWN-14	$1779
82% LG W28AWN-14	$2998
81% Daikin FTXM71PVMA	$2679

What to look for
See our buying guide, page 44

	COSTS		PERFORMANCE					
	Price ($)	Yearly running cost ($)	Overall score (%)	Cooling efficiency score (%)	Heating efficiency score (%)	Airflow score (%)	Noise indoor / outdoor (dB)	Maximum capacity – cooling (kW)
SMALL – LESS THAN 4KW COOLING CAPACITY								
Daikin FTXZ25NV1B	1846	292	96	98	95	92	38 / 46	2.5
• **LG** K09AWN-11	880	327	85	84	84	89	57 / 65	2.5
• **Mitsubishi** Heavy SRK20ZMXA-S	946	310	84	88	86	71	39 / 59	2
• **LG** P09AWN-14	875	356	81	79	78	89	57 / 65	2.5
• **LG** S09AWN-14	794	356	81	79	78	89	57 / 65	2.5
• **LG** W09AWN-14	1348	356	81	79	78	89	57 / 65	2.5
Daikin FTXZ35NV1B	2190	332	79	82	81	71	42 / 48	3.5
Mitsubishi Heavy SRK25ZMXA-S	960	327	78	77	80	75	41 / 60	2.55
Samsung F-AR09FSSSCWK1	1029	346	78	78	78	80	36 / 45	2.5
Fujitsu ASTG09KUCA	1509	358	77	78	76	77	42 / 47	2.5
Mitsubishi Heavy SRK25ZJX-S	940	327	77	77	80	70	41 / 60	2.55
MEDIUM – 4KW TO 6KW								
Daikin FTXZ50NV1B	3030	382	88	97	92	61	47 / 49	5
• **LG** P18AWN-14	1275	404	87	91	86	81	60 / 65	5
• **LG** S18AWN-14	1219	404	87	91	86	81	60 / 65	5
• **LG** W18AWN-14	2048	404	87	91	86	81	60 / 65	5
Fujitsu ASTG18KMCA	2359	409	83	96	83	59	46 / 47	5
Samsung F-AR18FSSSCWK1	1619	416	83	92	79	72	38 / 51	5
• **Daikin** FTXM50PVMA	2099	405	82	97	83	52	45 / 47	5
Mitsubishi Heavy SRK50ZJX-S1	1420	416	79	83	87	55	47 / 63	5
• **Mitsubishi Heavy** SRK50ZMXA-S	1430	416	79	83	87	55	47 / 63	5
Fujitsu ASTG22KMCA	2659	439	78	85	82	58	48 / 49	6
LARGE – 6.1 KW AND OVER								
• **LG** P24AWN-14	1569	454	89	90	87	89	65 / 66	7
• **LG** S24AWN-14	1513	454	89	90	87	89	65 / 66	7
• **LG** W24AWN-14	2498	454	89	90	87	89	65 / 66	7
Mitsubishi Heavy SRK63ZMA-S	1510	463	86	92	84	77	47 / 62	6.3
Fujitsu ASTG24KMCA	2909	469	84	90	85	70	49 / 52	7.1
• **LG** P28AWN-14	1858	494	82	80	81	89	65 / 66	8
• **LG** S28AWN-14	1779	494	82	80	81	89	65 / 66	8
• **LG** W28AWN-14	2998	494	82	80	81	89	65 / 66	8
Mitsubishi Heavy SRK92ZMA-S	2540	479	82	90	75	82	51 / 67	9.2
• **Daikin** FTXM71PVMA	2679	445	81	87	84	64	52 / 53	7.1

USING THE TABLE Due to space constraints, the table lists only the top models for each size category. • Newly tested **Scores** The overall score is change from their original published values, as the increasing efficiency and performance of new models occasionally requires us to rescale our scoring of the year in standby mode (based on electricity costs of $28/kWh). Standby costs add only a few dollars a year, but it may be a good idea to unplug your limited availability at time of publication.

	FEATURES									
Maximum capacity – heating (kW)	Number of fan speeds	Fast operation	Quiet operation	Fan-only mode	Sleep mode / with auto temperature reduction	Indoor model	Outdoor model	Dimensions indoor unit (cm, H x W x D)	Dimensions outdoor unit (cm, H x W x D)	Contact
3.6	5	✓	✓	✓	✓/✓	FTXZ25NV1B	RXZ25NV1B	29.5 x 79.8 x 37.2	79.5 x 69.3 x 30	daikin.com.au
3.2	5	✓	✓	✓	✓/✓	K09AWN-NM11	K09AWN-UM11	29.5 x 87.5 x 23.5	54.5. x 77 x 28.8	lge.com.au
2.5	4	✓	✓	✓	✓/✓	SRK20ZMXA-S	SRC20ZMXA-S	30.9 x 89 x 22	59.5 x 78 x 29	mhiaa.com.au
3.2	5	✓	✓	✓	✓/✓	P09AWN-NM14	P09AWN-UM14	29.5 x 87.5 x 23.5	54.5. x 77 x 28.8	lge.com.au
3.2	5	✓	✓	✓	✓/✓	S09AWN-NM14	P09AWN-UM14	29.5 x 87.5 x 23.5	54.5. x 77 x 28.8	lge.com.au
3.2	5	✓	✓	✓	✓/✓	W09AWN-NM14	P09AWN-UM14	29.5 x 87.5 x 23.5	54.5. x 77 x 28.8	lge.com.au
5	5	✓	✓	✓	✓/✓	FTXZ35NV1B	RXZ35NV1B	29.5 x 79.8 x 37.2	79.5 x 69.3 x 30	daikin.com.au
3.13	4	✓	✓	✓	✓/✓	SRK25ZMXA-S	SRC25ZMXA-S	30.9 x 89 x 22	59.5 x 78 x 29	mhiaa.com.au
3.2	4	✓	✓	✓	✓/✓	AR09FSSSCWKNSA	AR09FSSSCWKXSA	26 x 89.6 x 27.5	54.7 x 79 x 28.1	samsung.com.au
3.2	4	✓	✓	✓	✓/✓	ASTG09KUCA	AOTG09KUCA	28.2 x 87 x 18.5	54 x 79 x 29	fujitsugeneral.com.au
3.13	3	✓	✓	✓	✓/✓	SRK25ZJX-S	SRC25ZJX-S	30.9 x 89 x 22	59.5 x 78 x 29	mhiaa.com.au
6.3	5	✓	✓	✓	✓/✓	FTXZ50NV1B	RXZ50NV1B	29.5 x 79.8 x 37.2	79.5 x 69.3 x 30	daikin.com.au
6	5	✓	✓	✓	✓/✓	P18AWN-N214	P18AWN-U214	33 x 109 x 24.8	65.5 x 87 x 32	lge.com.au
6	5	✓	✓	✓	✓/✓	S18AWN-N214	P18AWN-U214	33 x 109 x 24.8	65.5 x 87 x 32	lge.com.au
6	5	✓	✓	✓	✓/✓	W18AWN-N214	P18AWN-U214	33 x 109 x 24.8	65.5 x 87 x 32	lge.com.au
6	4	✓	✓	✓	✓/✓	ASTG18KMCA	AOTG18KMCA	29.5 x 94 x 27	79 x 62 x 29	fujitsugeneral.com.au
6	4	✓	✓	✓	✓/✓	AR18FSSSCWKNSA	AR18FSSSCWKXSA	29.4 x 106.3 x 31.7	79.3 x 88 x 31	samsung.com.au
6	5	✓	✓	✓	✓/✓	FTXM50PVMA	RXM50PVMA	34 x 105 x 24.8	82.5 x 73.5 x 30	daikin.com.au
6	3	✓	✓	✓	✓/✓	SRK50ZJ-S1	SRC50ZJX-S1	30.9 x 89 x 22	64 x 80 x 29	mhiaa.com.au
6	4	✓	✓	✓	✓/✓	SRK50ZMXA-S	SRC50ZMXA-S	30.9 x 89 x 22	64 x 80 x 29	mhiaa.com.au
7.2	4	✓	✓	✓	✓/✓	ASTG22KMCA	AOTG22KMCA	29.5 x 94 x 27	79 x 62 x 29	fujitsugeneral.com.au
8	5	✓	✓	✓	✓/✓	P24AWN-N214	P24AWN-U214	33 x 109 x 24.8	80 x 87 x 32	lge.com.au
8	5	✓	✓	✓	✓/✓	S24AWN-N214	P24AWN-U214	33 x 109 x 24.8	80 x 87 x 32	lge.com.au
8	5	✓	✓	✓	✓/✓	W24AWN-N214	P24AWN-U214	33 x 109 x 24.8	80 x 87 x 32	lge.com.au
7.1	4	✓	✓	✓	✓/✓	SRK63ZMA-S	SRC63ZMA-S	31.8 x 109.8 x 24.8	75 x 88 x 34	mhiaa.com.au
8	4	✓	✓	✓	✓/✓	ASTG24KMCA	AOTG24KMCA	29.5 x 94 x 27	79 x 62 x 29	fujitsugeneral.com.au
9	5	✓	✓	✓	✓/✓	P28AWN-N214	P28AWN-U214	33 x 109 x 24.8	80 x 87 x 32	lge.com.au
9	5	✓	✓	✓	✓/✓	S28AWN-N214	P28AWN-U214	33 x 109 x 24.8	80 x 87 x 32	lge.com.au
9	5	✓	✓	✓	✓/✓	W28AWN-N214	P28AWN-U214	33 x 109 x 24.8	80 x 87 x 32	lge.com.au
10	4	✓	✓	✓	✓/✓	SRK92ZMA-S	SRC92ZMA-S	31.8 x 109.8 x 24.8	130 x 97 x 37	mhiaa.com.au
7.5	5	✓	✓	✓	✓/✓	FTXM71PVMA	RXM71PVMA	34 x 105 x 24.8	90 x 77 x 30	daikin.com.au

made up of cooling efficiency (40%), heating efficiency (40%) and airflow (20%). A model scoring 90% has excellent efficiency, 70% is good and 50% is borderline. Note that scores for previously tested models can method. **Annual running costs** We calculate how much each model costs to deliver 3000kWh of full cooling and 3000kWh of heating per year when running at its measured maximum capacity, with the remainder air conditioner (if possible) when it's not in use for long periods. **Price** Typical retail price as of September 2014. Actual prices can vary considerably from the suggested retail price. Newly released models may have

Where's my brand?

Not all brands respond to our survey. Without full information on specifications and ongoing availability, we haven't been able to include these brands, but hope to do so in future updates.

Another feature we're seeing on more new models is a Demand Response Enabling Device (DRED), also known as PeakSmart. This enables participating energy companies (currently Ergon Energy and Energex in Queensland) to remotely control the air conditioner in periods of peak electricity demand – usually in high summer when everyone wants to cool their homes – reducing both the strain on the grid and your household power consumption, without greatly affecting the air conditioner's performance. You may even receive an incentive payment or rebate for installing a model with DRED – check with your electricity supplier.

Stand by for good news

Obviously, it's important that an air conditioner is energy-efficient when running. But what about when it's just sitting idle? The good news is that, since 2011, energy efficiency ratings also factor in standby power consumption, which drives manufacturers to also look for efficiency in standby mode.

The cooling star rating is based on the air conditioner's Annual Energy Efficiency Ratio, which means that as well as each unit's operational efficiency, its standby and other non-operational power usage is also factored into its rating. In a similar way, the heating star rating is based on the Annual Coefficient of Performance.

Standby power is usually only a small part of an air conditioner's overall power consumption, but it adds up over time. The average standby power of models in this review is less than 4W. Some consume only 1W – others up to 11W.

PREVIOUSLY RECOMMENDED

SMALL	
96% Daikin FTXZ25NV1B (May 14)	$1846
MEDIUM	
88% Daikin FTXZ50NV1B (May 14)	$3030
83% Fujitsu ASTG18KMCA (Oct 13)	$2359
83% Samsung F-AR18FSSSCWK1 (May 14)	$1619
LARGE	
86% Mitsubishi Heavy SRK63ZMA-S (May 14)	$1510
84% Fujitsu ASTG24KMCA (Oct 13)	$2909
82% Mitsubishi Heavy SRK92ZMA-S (May 14)	$2540

About the rest

The table shows the top models in each category. There are models representing most cooling and heating capacities here.

But even 11W is a big improvement over models of the past, which could consume 90W (or more) in standby mode. That's because old models often had a heater to keep the oil in the compressor warm enough so that refrigerant didn't settle while the air conditioner wasn't running. Otherwise, starting the air conditioner could cause the refrigerant to boil, increasing wear on the compressor.

If you have an old unit, it could be worth upgrading. A new model pays for itself through lower energy usage, as well as better performance and features.

How we test

Air conditioners sold in Australia must be tested to the Australian standard AS/NZS 3823.2, and then registered in a government database at **energyrating.gov.au**, to ensure they meet the Minimum Energy Performance Standards (MEPS) and qualify for a star-rating label.

We used to test air conditioners using an expert external laboratory, but time and money constraints meant we could only review a very small number of models – about 20 per year, even though there are a few hundred split-system inverter models on the market at any one time. We could also cover only one size category at a time, and often had trouble sourcing models for testing, as we needed to test well ahead of the season and manufacturers often didn't have their new-season models available in time. Add in the fact that it cost us about $160,000 to buy and test those 20 models each year, and you can see why we thought it time to find a better value proposition for our members and other consumers.

In 2013 we changed our testing method and now source data on the models directly from manufacturers, before cross-checking it against the government registration database. Scores for each model featured are then calculated in a similar way to previous CHOICE tests, but can't be directly compared with those tests.

IMAGE: SHUTTERSTOCK

Cold comfort

A portable air conditioner can be a fast fix for a hot home, says **Chris Barnes**

When a heat wave hits and your home becomes a sauna, an air conditioner can be a godsend. For many Australian homes this means a split-system model, but these are permanently installed so aren't usually an option if you're renting. They also might not suit all locations within a home, and they usually cost more and aren't a quick fix – you'll often have to wait several days or even weeks before the installer can get to you.

In that case, a portable air conditioner may be the answer. You can have it up and running soon after bringing it home.

Is a single-duct for you?

Single-duct models (such as those we've tested) draw in air from the room, cool it, and blow the cool air back into the room, while venting the heat outside via a duct that you connect to a window. They come with a window kit to make the duct connection easier – this works best in a sliding window, and adjusts to the size of the opening to seal it off, so no outside hot air gets in.

The unit also condenses water from the air while cooling, collecting this in a tank or draining it away via a tube. Drier air feels more comfortable and enhances the cooling effect.

However, while they're convenient and often comparatively cheaper than split-systems, single-duct portable units aren't as effective or efficient. Venting the hot air outside through the duct results in a net air-pressure reduction, so more warm air is drawn into the room from the rest of the house. The portable air conditioner therefore faces a continual struggle to cool the room it's in. And portable units are also noisier (at least indoors) than most split-systems.

Nutshell

- Portable air conditioners aren't subject to energy efficiency ratings like other air conditioners, but nevertheless we've noticed a trend toward better efficiency this year.
- For more effective and efficient cooling or heating, a split-system air conditioner is a better choice, but may not be an option for everyone.

WHAT TO BUY

72%
Kogan Kaporaircon

Good points
- Comparatively very good energy efficiency
- Good cooling performance
- Reverse-cycle heating mode

Bad points
- Difficult to lift as it has no handles
- Limited instructions supplied; full instructions only available as a download from Kogan website

71%
DeLonghi PACA100ECO

Good points
- Comparatively excellent energy efficiency
- Very good controls (on remote and on unit)
- Very good instructions

Bad points
- Only OK cooling performance
- Water drainage hole plug difficult to insert

PREVIOUSLY RECOMMENDED

Note that scores have changed slightly from when these models were first tested, as improvements in efficiency and performance mean that we need to re-scale our scores from time to time.

78% Omega Altise OAPC16, $900 (Nov 12)
73% Midea MPPD12HRN1, $749 (Nov 13)
72% Convair CP12CS1, $699 (Nov 13)

ABOUT THE REST

Of the other newly tested models, the **Levante** has excellent energy efficiency but only OK cooling performance and ease of use; its remote is hard to use and its air filters are difficult to access. The **Omega Altise OAPC1213** and **Polocool** are only OK for cooling performance and energy efficiency. The cube-shaped **Argo** has good cooling performance, but only OK efficiency, and is also only OK for ease of use; it has very limited on-board controls (though the remote control is good).

	COST		PERFORMANCE						
	Price ($)	Running costs ($)	Overall score (%)	Cooling score (%)	Energy efficiency score (%)	Ease of use score (%)	Claimed cooling capacity (kW)	Measured cooling power consumption (kWh)	Claimed heating capacity (kW)
Omega Altise OAPC16	900	171	78	90	67	73	4.7	1.7	na
Midea MPPD12HRN1	749	111	73	68	77	74	3.5	1.1	2.9
Convair CP12CS1	699	111	72	69	76	71	3.5	1.1	na
• **Kogan** Kaporaircon	309	101	72	71	86	60	3.51	1	2.64
• **DeLonghi** PACA100ECO	599	81	71	57	94	68	2.85	0.8	na
DeLonghi PACWE18INV	1299	151	70	79	62	65	5	1.5	na
Dimplex DC15	1100	141	70	78	67	63	4.4	1.4	na
Dimplex DIMC15RC	1100	151	70	77	57	73	4.4	1.5	4.4
• **Levante** Tango12	699	71	70	58	92	64	3.51	0.7	na
Dimplex DIMC12RC	900	111	68	67	65	71	3.5	1.1	3.5
• **Omega** Altise OAPC1213	699	101	65	62	69	66	3.52	1	na
• **Argo** Dados 40	999	141	63	72	57	56	4	1.4	4
Dimplex DC10RC	700	91	63	55	67	71	3	0.9	3
• **Polocool** PC-44BP/C	995	131	62	62	58	65	4.4	1.3	na

USING THE TABLE Price Recommended retail, as of October 2014. **Scores** The overall score is made up of cooling (40%), energy efficiency (30%), tests. **Fan noise on high** Comparative only; what you actually hear depends on the environment. With the fan on high, most models will interfere
TABLE NOTES • Newly tested. **(A)** Manually adjustable only. **(B)** Auto. **(C)** Oscillating vertical louvres. **(D)** Not adjustable. **(E)** Manual vertical

No stars?

There isn't an Australian standard in place yet for portable air conditioners, because of several technical hurdles involved in devising a suitable test method to measure their performance and efficiency. This means that portable air conditioners are still not subject to the Minimum Energy Performance Standards (MEPS) and don't carry star rating labels. However, there's now a draft standard that's available for public discussion. Once the draft is approved, MEPS can be expected to follow in the not-too-distant future.

Encouragingly, some tested models – the Kogan, DeLonghi PACA100ECO and Levante – scored well for energy efficiency, so much so that we had to re-scale our efficiency scoring.

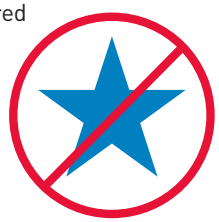


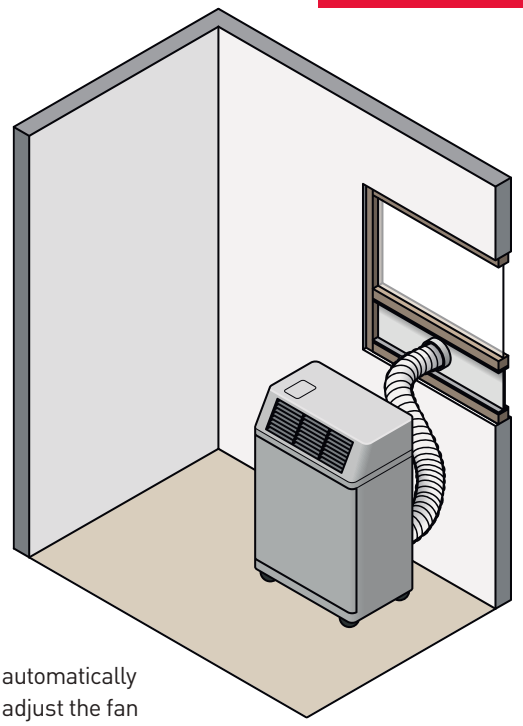
IMAGE: SHUTTERSTOCK

WHAT TO LOOK FOR:

Window kit Usually consists of a 10cm-wide piece of plastic, with a sliding extension inside and an elongated hole for the air conditioner's exhaust hose. The piece is about 1m long (see the table for the exact maximum length) to fit horizontally or vertically into a window opening.

Drain hose This leads to the outside via the venting kit, or into a container to catch the extracted water. Some models reuse the collected water to assist their cooling function, so you shouldn't need to empty the tank often, except possibly in very humid conditions. Note that marketing material rarely shows the vent kit or drain hose in the product photos, as they make the unit look less attractive.

Operating modes Cool, heat, auto, dry (dehumidify) or fan-only should be standard. Auto or "smart" modes automatically adjust the fan speed, depending on the target temperature you set for the unit, and the temperature of the room (it will use a higher fan speed to cool a hot room faster). ■



	FEATURES				SPECIFICATIONS					
Fan noise on high (dB) at 1m	Operating modes	Fan speeds	Oscillating louvres	Sleep timer / with auto temperature adjustment	Weight (kg)	Dimensions (cm, H x W x D)*	Length of power cord (m)	Length of duct (m)	Maximum length of window kit (cm)	Contact
67 – medium	cool / auto / fan	3	(A)	✓/✓	36.1	82 x 42 x 38	2.11	1.49	150	omegaaltise.com.au
58 – much quieter	cool / heat / auto / dry / fan	3 + auto	(B)	✓/✓	34.5	77 x 46 x 39	1.6	1.5	124	mideaair.com.au
58 – much quieter	cool / dry / fan	3	(A)	–/✓	30.9	75 x 45 x 39	1.6	1.3	116	convair.net.au
62 – quieter	cool / heat / auto / dry / fan	3 + auto	(C)	✓/✓	29.2	70 x 28 x 47	2	1.6	95	kogan.com.au
62 – quieter	cool / auto / dry / fan	3 + auto	(D)	✓/✓	31.7	77 x 46 x 39	1.9	1.1	95	delonghi.com.au
65 – medium	cool / auto / dry / fan	3	(D)	✓/✓	39.6	90 x 50 x 40	1.89	1.1	98	delonghi.com.au
65 – medium	cool / auto / dry	4	(A)	–/–	31.7	83 x 53 x 36	1.9	1.31	130	dimplex.com.au
66 – medium	cool / heat / dry	3 + auto	(A)	✓/✓	30.7	76 x 54 x 30	2	1.5	134	dimplex.com.au
62 – quieter	cool / auto / dry / fan	3 + auto	(E)	✓/✓	26.5	83 x 45 x 33	1.7	1.5	123	levanteinternational.com.au
64 – quieter	cool / heat / dry	3 + auto	(A)	✓/✓	28.6	76 x 54 x 30	1.9	1.4	134	dimplex.com.au
63 – quieter	cool / dry / fan	3 + auto	(A)	–/–	30.7	78 x 46 x 38	2	1.6	95	omegaaltise.com.au
66 – medium	cool / heat / dry / fan	3 + auto	(A)	✓/✓(F)	34.1	55 x 50 x 50	1.7	1.6	197	atlantics.com.au
64 – quieter	cool / heat / dry	3 + auto	(A)	✓/✓	25.9	62 x 53 x 31	2.4	1.3	119	dimplex.com.au
64 – medium	cool / dry / fan	3 + auto	(E)	–/–	39.6	80 x 37 x 57	2.4	1.5	129	polocool.com.au

and ease of use (30%). **Claimed cooling capacity** isn't comparable between portable and built-in air conditioners. **Measured power consumption** is the average power consumed in one hour during the cooling with normal conversation. **Features** See What to Look For, above. **Running cost** Approximate cost of operating the unit at maximum capacity for four hours per day, for three months in hot weather, based on 28c/kWh. louvres and oscillating horizontal louvres. **(F)** ECO function is similar to sleep timer. * Rounded to the nearest centimetre. **na** not applicable. All models made in China.

Tablets for all

Nutshell

- Tablets are perfect for consuming all forms of media and browsing online.
- Different display sizes allow for a customised tablet experience.

Tablets are fast becoming our main computing device, says **Denis Gallagher**, but which tablet is right for you?

Children growing up in the 70s or 80s would often play outside (I know, crazy, right?) using a water pistol as a laser gun to take out aliens, and the palm of the hand as a communicator, fingers tapping away as if at a futuristic Star Trek-style device. However, while the technology to create a tablet device did actually exist in the late 80s, it took the arrival of the Apple iPad in 2010 to truly capture our attention.

Worldwide sales of tablets since the release of the original iPad have risen from around 17 million in 2010 to over 200 million so far in 2014. By next year, researchers predict that tablet sales will have surpassed total PC sales (desktop and notebook PCs) for the first time, meaning a likelihood of sales in excess of 300 million tablets in 2015.

What's in your tablet?

Apple and Samsung dominate the tablet market, and spend a lot of advertising money to convince us that their devices are not the same. But as most of the stuff we do these days is done on a web browser, they're becoming remarkably similar. And, while it's not widely advertised, many of the components in an Apple iPad – such as the display screen and the processing chips – are made by companies such as Samsung.

Operating system (OS) choices include Apple's iOS environment, Google's Android (used in the Samsung, Sony, HP and Toshiba tablets), Microsoft Windows 8.1 on Surface tablets, and the full version of Windows 8.1 Pro on the Windows Surface Pro 3.

Most tablets vary in capacity from 16GB to 128GB, with your storage requirements dependent on how you plan to use the tablet. If you like to carry around your music, videos and lots of apps, storage capacity on the tablet is important. For light use such as email and web browsing, 16GB may be enough. However, you may be surprised at how much space the operating system and in-built apps take up, even before you add any of your own data. Check out the table on p 56 to compare storage size and availability and see how much space you think you'll need in your next tablet.

A tablet with external connections like a microSD card or USB slot (available on most Android and Windows tablets) means you don't need as much internal storage. Cloud storage, where you store your data online, is another option that's becoming very popular, particularly with Apple iPad owners.

Do you really need 4G?

All the Apple iPad models, as well as the Samsung Galaxy Note Pro and Tab S models in our test, have a 4G variant, giving you wireless broadband functionality, for around an extra $150 on top of your broadband plan. But you mightn't need a 4G tablet, as you may already have 4G in your back pocket.

Most of the latest smartphones support 4G networks for broadband data, so you can simply tether the phone to the tablet for online access. Advantages of using your phone include a single bill and the satisfaction of being able to control your kids' online access to the home tablet device.

Did you know?

Unlike a laptop, notebook or ultra book computer, a tablet device can be used during take-off and landing when flying, and also can be left in the bag when going through a TSA scanner machine. All the models tested (including the Surface Pro 3) are officially classed as tablet devices.

WHAT TO BUY

BEST TABLET

80%

Galaxy Tab S 10.5 (16GB version)

The latest iPad competitor from Samsung is the Galaxy Tab S 10.5, with our testers finding the 10.5-inch OLED screen to be one of the best displays tested. Both front and rear cameras can capture HD video, and while the 16GB on-board storage isn't that impressive, it can be increased through the use of microSD cards. You can make secure online payments, as well as quickly switching from one user to another, with a fingerprint scanner, and you also get fast web browsing if your home network supports the latest ac wireless standard. Multi-window support means you can have both YouTube and email windows open, and operating on the screen at the same time too.

BEST APPLE TABLET

79%

iPad Air (32GB version)

The iPad Air is the fifth iteration of Apple's ground-breaking tablet that first transformed the technology landscape in 2010. However, the iPad Air has been available for over a year now, and the iPad Air 2 has just hit the shelves.

The iPad Air we tested is a solid performer, and you'll get even better features and functionality if you upgrade to the latest iOS 8 software. But Apple, as usual, offers just enough new fun stuff in the update to tempt you to upgrade, so if you want an iPad Air, decide whether the lighter, thinner body and fingerprint sensor of the iPad Air 2 are worth the extra $120 you'll fork out for the newer model.

BEST SMALL TABLET

76%

iPad mini 2 (32GB version)

The most popular display size for e-readers (*CHOICE*, Apr 14) is less than eight-inches for good reason – the device is light enough to comfortably hold with one hand, with a reading area similar to a paperback novel. The mini is similar in design and weight to an e-reader, and is ideal if you also want to read online content or ebooks. It also has the same features and app support as the full-sized iPad.

The resolution of the retina display on the iPad mini 2 is about twice that of the iPad mini. But the mini is $120 cheaper and has a better battery life, so if you want an iPad that you can comfortably fit in your pocket, visit an Apple store and try out the different models before making a decision.

ABOUT THE REST

The two most important things to consider when you're choosing your tablet are display size and the operating system. If you decide to go with an Apple device, then you'll be using Apple's iOS 8. Display choices are an **iPad Air** with a 9.7-inch screen, or the diminutive **iPad mini 2** at 7.9 inches. The best-value Apple tablet is the **iPad mini 2**, although its resolution is half that of the other Apple tablets.

Choosing between the various Android offerings from Samsung, Toshiba and Sony is largely based on features such as HDMI or near field communication (NFC), display size and on-board storage capacity.

If you have an Amazon Kindle e-reader and want to upgrade to a colour display, the **Kindle Fire HDX** or **Kindle Fire HDX 8.9** are good value. Kindle does have its own closed OS, and although it has strong elements of Google Android, you can't get the same access to the Google Play store or Google Cloud storage. Instead you have a set of proprietary Amazon-based apps and solutions. Some people hate these restrictions, while others find the closed yet simple set-up reassuring.

1968

The movie *2001: A Space Odyssey* is released, showing a wireless tablet device

IMAGE: SHUTTERSTOCK

WHAT TO BUY (cont'd)

BEST LAPTOP REPLACEMENT

74%

Surface Pro 3 (256GB version) (Type Pro Cover $149 extra)

The mission of getting a tablet to do the work of a laptop has confounded tech companies for years. Microsoft has come as close as any, with the Surface Pro 3, creating a device that is a true tablet that won't shirk serious office or creative work. Unlike the iPad or Android tablet devices, the Surface Pro 3 uses a desktop operating system (Windows 8.1 Pro) with all the inherent advantages – support for desktop office, video and image-editing programs. You also get the connections you would expect from a laptop, like USB 3.0 and mini display-port connections.

While battery life of five hours for general work use or nine hours' light

		PERFORMANCE																			
	Price ($)	Overall score (%)	Storage size (GB)	Storage available (GB)	Ease of use score (%)	Screen quality score (%)	Battery score (%)	Performance score (%)	Device overview score (%)	Backup and security score (%)	Web surfing score (%)	Watching videos score (%)	Ebook score (%)	Email score (%)	Making videos score (%)	Music score (%)	Photos score (%)	Video calls score (%)	Multimedia versatility score (%)	Battery life (h:min)	Start-up from cold (sec)
Samsung Galaxy Tab S 10.5	599	80	16	10	90	86	69	72	63	80	87	90	81	93	74	61	79	82	83	6:56	27
Apple iPad Air	549	79	32	58	81	80	78	80	69	76	90	90	84	93	73	52	75	82	67	10:58	18
Samsung Galaxy Tab S 8.4	479	79	16	10	83	86	73	72	65	80	87	90	81	93	74	61	79	82	83	7:35	25
Apple iPad Air	499	78	16	12	81	80	78	80	62	76	90	90	84	93	73	52	75	82	67	10:58	18
Samsung Galaxy Note 10.1 (2014)	649	78	16	8.7	86	81	65	77	60	56	87	90	87	93	82	66	79	91	83	8:03	24
Apple iPad mini 2	429	76	32	58	74	79	69	79	71	76	91	90	84	93	73	43	75	82	67	9:52	19
Microsoft Surface 2	399	76	32	17.1	89	77	61	69	65	59	89	90	72	93	83	52	79	91	50	8:01	20
Samsung Galaxy NotePro 12.2	899	76	32	25	77	79	70	75	65	69	87	90	83	93	74	57	79	73	67	10:44	26
Amazon Kindle HDX 8.9	499	75	16	10.8	80	77	68	75	58	46	86	90	89	86	73	52	84	77	83	8:01	29
Microsoft Surface 2	549	75	32	17.1	85	77	61	69	63	59	89	90	72	93	83	52	79	91	50	na	20
Apple iPad mini	299	74	16	9.6	74	74	79	72	60	76	85	90	76	93	70	43	75	82	67	13:03	na
Microsoft Surface Pro 3	1829	74	256	208	82	74	47	87	65	64	89	90	72	93	83	71	81	91	50	5:20	12
Sony Xperia Z2	699	74	32	25.5	82	77	50	67	72	69	87	90	87	93	77	71	70	73	83	5:56	28
HP Slate 8 Pro	393	73	16	12	81	68	66	75	61	69	84	90	76	91	70	67	66	73	67	8:25	26
Sony Xperia Z2	599	73	16	11.2	82	77	50	67	68	69	87	90	87	93	77	71	70	73	83	5:56	28
Toshiba Excite Pro AT10LE-A-108	629	73	16	10.5	79	67	63	81	59	61	86	90	79	93	77	66	79	82	83	7:05	na
Google Nexus 7	339	72	32	25.8	70	76	62	73	65	63	86	90	73	91	73	52	79	68	67	6:56	22
Sony Xperia Tablet Z	579	71	32	25.9	78	67	51	77	64	57	79	90	76	93	83	66	79	78	67	6:06	na
Amazon Kindle Fire HDX	309	70	16	10.4	73	77	63	75	56	46	86	90	89	86	63	52	na	77	47	7:25	28
HP Omni 10	399	70	32	28	82	58	56	81	65	55	90	68	69	93	68	52	68	73	67	8:10	14
Samsung Galaxy Tab 3 8	249	70	16	10.4	81	67	50	72	60	49	86	90	76	93	72	57	63	82	33	5:35	na
Sony Xperia Tablet Z	539	70	16	9.9	78	67	51	77	59	57	79	90	76	93	83	66	79	78	67	6:06	na

USING THE TABLE Price Recommended retail, as of October 2014. **Scores** The overall score is made up of ease of use (20%), screen quality (20%), battery (15%), performance (10%), device overview (10%), web don't contribute to the overall score. All models on test support Wi-Fi. Models supporting the faster ac standard are marked in the table. **TABLE NOTES** *App Store* **A** Apple **AZ** Amazon **G** Google Play **SA** Samsung Apps

use may be impressive for a laptop, it's at the lower end of the scale for a tablet.

It has a faster processor, larger display, integrated mouse pad and an improved Type Pro Cover keyboard, allowing you to position the tablet in virtually any position to better suit your workspace. The surface pen is a handy selection tool – it can perform mark-up tasks within shared office documents. Sadly, the keyboard isn't in the standard package (currently just under $1900), so you'll need to factor in the extra cost.

How we test: tablet update

Our testing process has changed since our last test, with several new performance scores introduced (ebook reading, watching videos and making videos) to reflect the many and varied ways consumers use their tablets. So scores for products in our previous test can't be directly compared with those in this one.

FEATURES									SPECIFICATIONS										
Charge by computer USB port	Can use USB key	Near field communication (NFC)	Stylus supplied	GPS	Voice control	HDMI	Memory card (SD, mini SD, microSD, other)	Wi-Fi (802.11ac)	Screen diagonal (inches)	Native resolution – width (pixels)	Native resolution – height (pixels)	Video resolution (front/rear)	Front camera resolution (Mp)	Rear camera resolution (Mp)	Operating system version	App store	Weight (kg) (without keyboard)	Dimensions (mm, W x H x D)	Website
✓				✓	✓		✓	✓	10.5	2560	1600	1080 / 1080	2.1	8	Android 4.4.2	G, SA	0.5	242 x 177 x 7	samsung.com/au
✓					✓				9.7	2048	1536	1080 / 720	1.2	5	iOS 7.0.3	A	0.5	240 x 169 x 7.7	apple.com.au
✓	✓			✓	✓		✓	✓	8.5	2560	1600	1080 / 1080	2.1	8	Android 4.4.2	G, SA	0.3	213 x 125 x 7	samsung.com/au
✓					✓				9.7	2048	1536	1080 / 720	1.2	5	iOS 7.0.3	A	0.5	240 x 169 x 7.7	apple.com.au
✓	✓		✓	✓	✓		✓	✓	10.1	2560	1600	1080 / 720	2.1	6	Android 4.3	G	0.5	243 x 171 x 9	samsung.com/au
✓					✓				7.9	2048	1536	1080 / 720	1.2	5	iOS 7.0.4	A	0.3	200 x 134 x 7.6	apple.com.au
	✓				✓	✓	✓		10.5	1920	1080	1080 / 1080	3.0	3.7	Windows RT 8.1	W	0.6	274 x 172 x 9	microsoft.com.au
✓	✓		✓	✓			✓	✓	12.2	2560	1600	1080 / 1080	2.1	8	Android 4.4.2	G	0.7	296 x 204 x 8	samsung.com/au
✓									8.9	2560	1600	1080 / 720	0.8	7.7	Fire OS 3.0	AZ	0.4	230 x 157 x 8	amazon.com.au
	✓				✓	✓	✓		10.5	1920	1080	1080 / 1080	3.0	3.7	Windows RT 8.1	W	0.9	274 x 172 x 9	microsoft.com.au
✓									7.9	1024	768	1080 / 720	1.2	5	iOS 6.0.1	A	0.3	200 x 134 x 7.2	apple.com.au
	✓		✓		✓		✓	✓	12.2	2160	1440	1080 / 1080	4.5	4.5	Windows 8.1 Pro	W	1.1	292 x 201 x 9	microsoft.com.au
✓	✓	✓		✓			✓	✓	10.1	1920	1200	1080 / 1080	2.1	8	Android 4.4.2	G	0.4	266 x 172 x 6	sony.com.au
✓	✓			✓			✓		8	1600	1200	1080 / 720	0.9	8	Android 4.2.2	G	0.4	220 x 141 x 10	hp.com.au
✓	✓	✓		✓			✓	✓	10.1	1920	1200	1080 / 1080	2.1	8	Android 4.4.2	G	0.4	266 x 172 x 6	sony.com.au
✓	✓			✓	✓	✓	✓		10	2560	1600	720 / 720	1.2	8	Android 4.2.1	G	0.6	258 x 178 x 11	mytoshiba.com.au
✓	✓	✓		✓	✓				7	1920	1280	1080 / 720	0.8	5	Android 4.3	G	0.3	200 x 114 x 8.7	google.com.au/nexus/7
✓	✓	✓		✓	✓		✓	✓	10.8	1920	1200	1080 / 1080	2.1	8.9	Android 4.1.2	G	0.5	264 x 172 x 7.2	sony.com.au
✓									7	1920	1200	720 / na	0.8	na	Fire OS 3.0	AZ	0.3	186 x 127 x 9	amazon.com.au
✓	✓					✓	✓		10.1	1920	1200	1080 / 1080	2.1	6	Windows 8.1	W	0.7	260 x 181 x 11	hp.com.au
✓	✓			✓	✓		✓		8	1280	800	720 / 480	1.2	4.9	Android 4.2.2	G	0.3	210 x 124 x 8	samsung.com/au
✓	✓	✓		✓	✓		✓	✓	10.8	1920	1200	1080 / 1080	2.1	8.9	Android 4.1.2	G	0.5	264 x 172 x 7.2	sony.com.au

surfing (5%), watching videos (4%), ebook (2.5%), email (2.5%), making videos (2.5%), music (2.5%), photos (2.5%), video calls (2.5%) and multimedia versatility (1%). Backup and security features are also assessed, but **W** Windows. **na** Not applicable.

Have camera, will travel

Chris Ruggles focuses on how to gear up for a trip

Getting ready to travel can be exciting and daunting in equal measure – there's the anticipation of new experiences and ticking things off your bucket list, and the fear that you'll forget something essential and spend the whole trip kicking yourself! Here are some tips for making sure you're prepared to take the photographs that will keep your trip fresh in your memory.

Getting packed

Bags

Be they dedicated camera bags, backpacks or on-board luggage, the primary function for photographers' bags is to make sure your camera is protected from impact, dust and moisture, and is secure and safe. Travellers are always a target for thieves, so choose a moisture-proof padded bag you can lock and that can't be easily cut open.

Tip Pack your SLR, or other system camera body, with lenses detached. That way, any bumps won't damage the lens mount on the camera.

Batteries

Most cameras come with a proprietary rechargeable battery. Buy a spare and keep them both charged. Cameras that take AA batteries are great if you're somewhere where

Rule one

Never carry more than you need

Rule two

Make sure you have everything you need

they are readily available, but they don't last long and are bulky to carry.

Chargers, cables and connectors

Make sure you pack your camera charger and/or battery cable for charging. You might need a wall plug converter if you're heading overseas. Most will work in a number of countries, but it pays to check. Don't forget to pack a connection cable for transferring your images.

Travel insurance

Your travel insurance should include your camera. However, if you've got a lot of equipment you might need to consider getting some specific cover – always check your policy for exclusions. Also, make a record of the brand, model and serial numbers for all your gear and put it somewhere secure and accessible. It's a good idea to have one copy with you and another at home.

Back-up cards

Storage cards (SD and Compact Flash) are cheap, so pack a spare. They're pretty robust, but keep them away from dust and moisture, which can easily be transferred to your camera.

Tip If your SD card gets wet, dry it off and leave it for at least 24 hours in a dry place before trying to use it. It'll probably survive, and you shouldn't lose the images on it.

What about backups?

If you're travelling for a long period, or just take lots of pictures, it may be a good idea to pack a small computer so you can download your images (and also back them up to cloud storage) and free up space on your storage card. If you're really concerned about losing precious shots, you can also take a small USB external drive and occasionally back up the images to it. All this adds weight and stuff you have to look after, but it could save some heartache.

Tripod

They're bulky, clumsy and take up space, but even the best image stabilisation can't compete with a solid tripod when the light gets really low.

What can you do without?

Once you've packed and think you're ready to go, stop and look at what's in the bag. Take out anything that you can do without. Remember that you're going to have to lug this stuff around, and nothing puts a damper on a holiday like a bad back.

On the road

Planes, trains and buses

Crossing from one country to another may be problematic when you're carrying a lot of equipment. It may be wise to compromise and stick to one small unobtrusive camera if you're heading for a country where borders can be tricky.

Avoid putting anything valuable or delicate in checked luggage. Chargers, cables and other spares are probably going to be fine, but always keep your main camera and lenses in your carry-on. Check airline luggage limits to make sure this will be possible. This is especially important for internal flights that might have more stringent restrictions.

Hotels

Hotel safes are a good option if you're leaving any valuables in your room. This includes computers and external drives, so choosing a small camera or computer may make life easier.

In the street

It's really easy to lose yourself in the moment when you see the shot that will make all your Facebook friends jealous – but that's also when you can get yourself into trouble.

Tip Never use your camera immediately after leaving a cold air-conditioned hotel and going into a humid street. Electronic devices don't like moisture and it's very likely that there'll be some condensation in the camera. Waiting a few minutes for the camera to adjust to the surrounding temperature could save you a lot of money down the line.

Be careful not to cross cultural boundaries – sometimes asking first if you can take a picture will avoid an ugly confrontation. Pay attention to traffic and keep your gear close – never leave bags of any sort sitting beside you. It'll be too much of a temptation.

Choosing a camera

Do you really need a camera? Will your phone do the trick? These are no longer silly questions. If you're just looking for records of events and don't need the extra quality or flexibility a dedicated camera can provide, a decent phone camera will do just fine, and save you space and weight. If you want something more specialised, consider your needs, skill level and your travel plans when buying.

IMAGES: THINKSTOCK

Light and long

These cameras have long zooms and can fit in a pocket. They're ideal for situations where you can't get close to the action and don't want the bulk of a system camera.

Olympus Stylus SH50, $379
Dimensions: 112 x 64 x 43 (mm)
Weight: 272g
Zoom: 25–600mm (35mm equivalent)

Panasonic Lumix DMC-TZ40, $399
Dimensions: 108.3 x 58.9 x 27.7 (mm)
Weight: 198g
Zoom: 24–480mm (35mm equivalent)

Nikon Coolpix S9600, $349
Dimensions: 110 x 62 x 32 (mm)
Weight: 208g
Zoom: 25–550mm (35mm equivalent)

Wet and wild

Rugged cameras may not have high image quality or ease of use, but they will work underwater. Take care to check what depths they can go to, and always make sure the camera is completely dry and dust-free before opening it to change the battery or storage card.

The **Nikon 1 AW1** isn't cheap but it's the only system camera we've tested designed for diving. It also has an electronic compass, altimeter, depth gauge and is freeze-proof.

Nikon Coolpix AW120, $449
Dimensions: 112 x 69 x 28 (mm)
Weight: 224g
Zoom: 24–120mm (35mm equivalent)

Nikon 1 AW1, $999*
Dimensions: 124 x 72 x 38 (mm)
Weight: 379g
Zoom: 30–74mm (35mm equivalent)*

* With the 1 Nikkor AW 11-27.5 mm 1:3.5–5.6 lens, but **1 Nikkor AW 10mm f/2.8** is also available.

All in one

If you're looking for image quality with the convenience of a single lens, these cameras will do the job very well. The Canon has the edge in overall image quality, but the Panasonic has a much longer zoom and is easier to use. Neither is a lightweight option.

Panasonic Lumix DMC-FZ 1000, $1199
Dimensions: 143 x 101 x 131 (mm)
Weight: 871g
Zoom: 25–400mm (35mm equivalent)

Canon PowerShot G1 X Mark II, $810
Dimensions: 122 x 112 x 82 (mm)
Weight: 621g
Zoom: 24–120mm (35mm equivalent)

Systems

The joy of a system camera is having the ability to change lenses to cope with different situations. These cameras are priced based on the lens we tested them with, but there are many other options available.

They are very versatile and well worth considering if you're willing to carry around the extra gear. ■

Olympus OM-D E-M1 + M.ZUIKO DIGITAL ED 12-40mm 1:2.8 PRO, $2399
Dimensions: 135 x 93 x 74 (mm)
Weight: 551g
Zoom: 24–80mm (35mm equivalent)

Panasonic Lumix DMC-GH4H + Lumix G VARIO 14-140 mm, $2649
Dimensions: 140 x 95 x 84 (mm)
Weight: 606g
Zoom: 28–280mm (35mm equivalent)

Under the grill

Which is best – a standalone microwave, microwave with grill or a convection microwave? **Martha Psiroukis** finds out

You're not without choice when it comes to microwaves, but which type is the better option? Standalone microwaves in this report cost from $120 to $690 – a huge range, showing that price is no indicator of performance. The latest addition to our recommended list – the Sharp R330YS is also the cheapest in our What to buy group. But have you ever wished for really golden au gratin while zapping your home veggie harvest? Perhaps a microwave with a grill is in order.

However, three of the five models in this test only scored 65 per cent for grilling evenness, and one just 55 per cent. Their purchase prices range from $199 (a very small size) to $489. The Panasonic with the better grilling performance of 85 per cent retails for $479 – it's the only one with a grill that we recommend. While they're reasonably good all-round performers (see product profiles and About the rest, page 58), this does raise the question of how a convection microwave might compare in terms of value. In our past combination microwave report, prices range from $159 (mid-range good performer) to $559 (the top performer) for larger sized units (see *CHOICE*, Feb 13, page 57 for details). So it seems that if you want more than just a food zapper, you're better off going for the whole shebang and buying a combi-microwave.

Nutshell

- Eight new models tested, five with grills.
- We find new cream for our crop.

PREVIOUSLY RECOMMENDED (WITHOUT GRILL)

87% LG MS3840SR (Feb 12)	$239
87% Sharp R350YS (Feb 14)	$229
86% Sharp R395YS (Feb 12)	$299
85% LG MS3840SRSK (Feb 12)	$269
83% Breville BMO634 (Feb 14)	$400
82% Samsung ME6104ST (Feb 11)	$249

WHAT TO LOOK FOR

- **Visibility** A bright interior light and large, transparent viewing window lets you check your food as it cooks.
- **Controls** Look for easy-to-use controls and instructions on the display, and check inside the door for a quick user guide.
- **Cleaning** Check for holes, gaps and crevices that trap food and grease. Stainless steel exteriors are harder to clean.
- **Size/space** You need a 10cm space around the outside for ventilation, and at least 20cm above where the vent is located.
- **Automatic functions** prompt you to enter the weight and type of food for the microwave to calculate the cooking time.
- **Quick boost/start** Most can increase cooking time in one- or half-minute increments if you press the button again.
- **Time-adjust during cooking** allows you to increase or decrease the time programmed during cooking.
- **Sensor cooking/reheating** programs can control time by measuring vapours emitted during cooking or reheating.
- **Multi-stage programming** can perform a sequence of functions, such as defrost, cook and then leave to stand.
- **Child lock safety** means you can push a sequence of buttons to deactivate the microwave.
- **Kitchen timer** can be used to time other kitchen tasks such as boiling an egg on a stovetop.
- **Cooling fans** are useful to cool the interior after cooking, but they're noisy in the case of some Panasonic, Westinghouse, Omega and Breville models tested.

IMAGE: SHUTTERSTOCK

WHAT TO BUY

WITHOUT GRILL

90%
Sharp R330YS

Good points

- Best overall, with an excellent cooking performance score
- Excellent results for cooking broccoli, reheating a solid food, defrosting mince and chicken
- Good for ease of use – very good controls
- Easy to clean and good food visibility

Bad points

- Basic instructions
- Firm pressure required to press door lever
- Noisy vibration during cooking

WITH GRILL

75%
Panasonic NN-GD682S

Good points

- Good overall, with a very good cooking performance score
- Excellent result for cooking broccoli
- Display is clear with very good controls
- Sensor functions
- Comprehensive instructions with recipes

Bad points

- Only OK for ease of use – very poor visibility
- Only OK for reheating a solid food
- Stainless steel exterior requires extra effort to clean – control panel accumulates grime
- Noisy cooling fan during and after cooking

ABOUT THE REST

The **Breville Big Easy BMO234's** display is bright and clear; it's easy to use, and has an easy to clean exterior. There is a good selection of auto-cook options, and it has comprehensive instructions, including recipes. But it's only OK for reheating solid food and for visibility through the door during use. It also vibrates noisily during cooking. And don't be misled by the label on the box claiming that rice can be cooked to a light and fluffy consistency in 10 minutes – there's no reference to a recipe or to an auto-cook function for rice.

The **Kambrook KMO400** has a bright and clear display, is easy to use, and has an easy to clean exterior. There's a good selection of auto-cook options, and it comes with comprehensive instructions, but it's only OK for reheating solid food and visibility through the door during use.

PRODUCT	COSTS			PERFORMANCE				
	Price ($)	Annual standby cost ($)	Annual cost for reheating plated meal once a day ($)	Overall score (%)	Cooking performance (%)	Ease of use (%)	Cooking broccoli (%)	Defrosting mince meat (%)
• **Sharp** R330YS	199	2.07	11.43	90	95	77	100	100
LG MS3840SR	239	4.60	12.07	87	91	77	100	92
Sharp R350YS	229	10.32	12.26	87	90	80	80	95
Sharp R395YS	299	9.99	11.86	86	90	77	100	100
LG MS3840SRSK	269	4.53	11.89	85	89	77	100	95
Breville The Quick Touch BMO634 (A)	400	2.93	11.12	83	86	77	80	100
Samsung ME6104ST	249	4.45	10.39	82	92	58	100	100
• **Breville** The Big Easy BMO234	170	1.46	9.66	79	82	70	100	82
• **Westinghouse** WMG281SF	489	4.01	9.85	79	88	61	100	100
Breville The Quick and Easy BMO300	250	1.55	10.88	78	86	58	100	94
Panasonic NN-ST641W	219	5.16	10.32	78	83	66	80	90
Panasonic NN-ST663W	279	5.13	10.38	78	82	68	100	74
• **Whirlpool** GT286BLM	399	2.62	7.94	78	84	65	100	100
• **Kambrook** KMO400	120	1.37	10.12	77	80	70	100	83
Omega OM30X	299	1.45	9.46	77	82	64	100	94
Panasonic NN-ST671S	329	5.04	10.41	77	84	62	100	80
Samsung ME6124ST	299	2.49	11.45	76	85	55	80	80
• **Panasonic** NN-GD682S	479	5.86	10.20	75	83	58	100	80
Panasonic NN-SD691S	359	5.56	10.36	75	82	58	100	80
Samsung ME1113TST/XSA	329	3.47	11.31	75	79	64	100	76
Breville The Compact and Simple BMO100	200	3.89	9.95	73	78	61	100	68
• **Sharp** R60A0S	199	1.56	8.53	72	76	63	80	100
• **Omega** OM30GX	349	1.45	11.09	71	74	64	100	100
Panasonic NNSF550W	249	5.50	10.03	71	75	62	100	53
Smeg SA35MX	550	4.19	10.50	70	74	62	100	72
Smeg SA37X	690	9.78	10.61	70	77	52	100	76
Samsung MS34F606MAT	369	1.42	12.27	62	63	60	80	0

USING THE TABLE Scores The overall score is made up of: cooking (70% – made up of four test scores weighted equally, or five where **year** is calculated on the energy used reheating a plated meal everyday at 28 cents per kWh. **Price** Recommended retail, as of September cally similar to the BMO734 in stainless steel; the only difference is the colour. **(B)** Only for beverages.

The **Sharp R60A0S** is good overall, with comprehensive instructions and guidelines, but is only OK for ease of use, reheating solid food and grilling evenness. It has poor visibility through the door, a small turntable, and the touch controls require firm pressure to activate. The stainless steel exterior needs extra effort to clean.

The **Omega OM30GX** is good overall but is only OK for ease of use and evenness of grilling. And it is the lowest performer for reheating solid food, is only OK for visibility through the door during use, has very basic instructions, and vibrates noisily during cooking. The small stainless steel panel on the exterior requires extra effort to clean, and some functions are not intuitive, so you'll need to refer to the manual. ■

IMAGE: SHUTTERSTOCK

			FEATURES										SPECIFICATIONS					
Defrosting chicken (%)	Reheating quiche (%)	Grilling toast (%)	Inverter	Sensor cook/ reheat	Auto-cook	Auto reheat	Adjust time during cooking	Number of power levels	Delayed start or pre-set cooking	Kitchen timer	Multi-stage cooking	Grill	Wattage (W)	External dimensions (cm, H x W x D, claimed)	Useable cavity dimensions (cm, H x W x D, measured)	Useable shelf (turntable) (cm, diameter)	Volume (L, measured)	Contact
90	90	na			✓	✓(B)	✓	11		✓	✓		1100	30 x 54 x 42	20 x 36 x 38	32	27	sharp.net.au
90	81	na			✓	✓	✓	10		✓	✓		1100	32 x 56 x 43	24 x 40 x 41	35	39	lg.com.au
90	93	na	✓	✓	✓		✓	10	✓	✓	✓		1200	31 x 52 x 45	22 x 37 x 39	32	32	sharp.net.au
80	81	na	✓	✓	✓		✓	10	✓	✓	✓		1200	31 x 52 x 44	24 x 37 x 37	31	33	sharp.net.au
90	70	na		✓	✓	✓	✓	10		✓	✓		1100	32 x 56 x 43	24 x 40 x 41	35	39	lg.com.au
90	74	na		✓	✓	✓	✓	10		✓	✓		1100	31 x 52 x 45	24 x 36 x 39	32	34	breville.com.au
90	76	na		✓	✓		✓	5		✓	✓		1000	30 x 52 x 39	22 x 35 x 35	30	27	samsung.com.au
80	68	na			✓	✓		5			✓		1100	31 x 52 x 42	24 x 36 x 39	32	34	breville.com.au
90	83	65			✓	✓	✓	5	✓		✓	✓	900	31 x 51 x 42	19 x 34 x 37	32	24	westinghouse.com.au
90	60	na			✓	✓		5	✓		✓		1100	32 x 52 x 45	24 x 36 x 39	30	34	breville.com.au
80	80	na	✓		✓	✓	✓	6	✓	✓	✓		1100	31 x 53 x 39	24 x 36 x 37	34	32	panasonic.com.au
80	76	na	✓	✓			✓	10	✓	✓	✓		1100	31 x 53 x 39	24 x 36 x 37	34	32	panasonic.com.au
90	66	65					✓	5				✓	700	30 x 52 x 41	21 x 34 x 33	28	24	whirlpool.com.au
80	57	na			✓	✓		5			✓		900	34 x 52 x 43	22 x 34 x 37	32	28	kambrook.com.au
80	54	na			✓	✓		5		✓	✓		900	31 x 52 x 44	22 x 34 x 37	32	28	omegaappliances.com.au
90	66	na	✓	✓			✓	10		✓	✓		1100	31 x 52 x 39	24 x 36 x 37	32	32	panasonic.com.au
90	91	na		✓	✓	✓	✓	10		✓	✓		1000	30 x 52 x 42	22 x 37 x 37	30	30	samsung.com.au
80	68	85	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	10	✓	✓	✓	✓	1000	31 x 53 x 41	20 x 36 x 36	34	26	panasonic.com.au
80	69	na	✓	✓			✓	10	✓	✓	✓		1100	31 x 53 x 40	24 x 36 x 37	34	32	panasonic.com.au
90	52	na		✓	✓	✓	✓	10		✓	✓		1100	30 x 52 x 39	24 x 36 x 36	31	30	samsung.com.au
70	73	na			✓	✓		5			✓		900	34 x 52 x 43	20 x 33 x 35	31	23	breville.com.au
70	64	65			✓	✓	✓	11		✓	✓	✓	750	26 x 44 x 36	16 x 31 x 37	26	18	sharp.net.au
70	46	55			✓		✓	5		✓	✓	✓	900	33 x 52 x 44	22 x 34 x 37	32	28	omegaappliances.com.au
90	58	na	✓		✓	✓		6		✓			1000	33 x 52 x 41	23 x 36 x 34	na	28	panasonic.com.au
70	55	na			✓	✓	✓	10	✓	✓	✓		1000	34 x 56 x 44	24 x 38 x 40	35	36	smeg.com.au
80	51	na			✓	✓	✓	10		✓	✓		1000	34 x 56 x 47	23 x 37 x 40	35	34	smeg.com.au
80	90	na		✓	✓	✓	✓	10		✓	✓		1100	30 x 52 x 41	38 x 22 x 40	34	33	samsung.com.au

there is a grill) and ease of use (30%). **Features** See What to look for, page 57. **Wattage** The higher the wattage, the faster the food will cook – but it doesn't necessarily give a better result. **Running costs/** 2014. **TABLE NOTES** • Newly tested models. **na** This is a flatbed model with no turntable, so the measurement doesn't apply. **(A)** The Breville BMO634 is available in black, white or cranberry, and is techni-

Nutshell

- Consider when and where you should use single-use batteries.
- Lithium batteries lasted the longest in our test, and these are a good option for high-performance electronic toys and gadgets.

One shot at glory

While rechargeable batteries provide better value over the long term, Denis Gallagher finds single-use batteries still have their place

Single-use batteries, also known as disposable batteries, are designed to be used until they have no power left, then tossed in the bin. This sounds like a poor option when you compare them to rechargeable batteries. Yet single-use batteries are still a viable option for a wide range of devices, from digital cameras to remote controls to battery-operated toys. We put 26 single-use AA and AAA batteries to the test to see which models last longest overall. We also see which ones hold their capacity longest at a level required to power high-drain electronics.

72% of all consumer batteries used are either AAA or AA

Lithium and alkaline batteries are about the same in nearly every aspect, as far as functionality goes. But lithium batteries have a higher capacity, slightly higher initial voltage and a longer shelf life. This means that people can use lithium batteries for more powerful devices without having to worry about the battery power draining too quickly. The downside to this is that they're also more expensive.

If your toys and devices aren't particularly demanding as far as power goes though, you may want to consider some good-quality rechargeable batteries instead of single-use batteries – you'll save some cash as well as helping reduce landfill.

	COSTS	
	Price per battery ($)*	Price per pack of 4 ($)
AA BATTERIES		
Energizer Ultimate Lithium	5.38	21.50
Eveready Lithium	4.25	16.99
Varta Professional Lithium	2.48	9.90
Duracell Ultra	1.75	6.98
Activ Energy (Aldi)	0.62	2.49
Winmax	0.89	3.55
Energizer Advanced	2.61	10.45
Duracell Coppertop	2.38	9.50
Energizer Max	2.00	7.99
Eveready Gold	1.50	5.99
Coles Advance+	1.13	4.50
Eclipse	1.24	4.95
Chevron	1.13	4.50
Ecoalkalines	1.37	5.49
Sony Stamina Plus	2.35	9.40
Dick Smith	1.75	6.98
Varta	0.75	3.00
Fujitsu G	1.99	7.95
AAA BATTERIES		
Energizer Ultimate Lithium	4.23	16.90
Activ Energy (Aldi)	0.62	2.49
Winmax	0.50	2.00
Duracell Ultra	2.23	8.90
Duracell Coppertop	2.38	9.50
Chevron	0.63	2.50
Eveready Gold	1.31	5.25
Dick Smith	1.75	6.98

BEST LITHIUM BATTERY

89%

Energizer Ultimate Lithium (4 x AA)

The Energizer Ultimate Lithium delivered the highest capacity for a longer period than the other batteries tested. This is the battery you should consider when you need your camera flash, remote-controlled race car or other high-drain devices to perform at their best.

BEST ALKALINE BATTERY

74%

Duracell Ultra (4 x AA)

The most impressive performer among the alkaline batteries delivers good battery capacity, to power devices at a good level for longer than the other alkaline batteries tested. While not the cheapest tested, this is nevertheless good value at well under $2 per battery.

PERFORMANCE					SPECIFICATIONS				
Overall score (%)	Capacity at 1.0V, mAh	Capacity at 0.7V, mAh	Time to reach 1.0V (h)	Time to Reach 0.7V (h)	Battery type	Best before	Product code	Country of origin	Contact
93	3260	3281	22.9	23.2	Lithium	Mar 2028	2198194	Singapore	energizerbatteries.com.au
84	2932	2955	20.9	21.2	Lithium	2025	2199803	Singapore	evereadybatteries.com
79	2698	2852	19.6	21.5	Lithium	2023	6106 411 404	China	varta-consumer.com/en-au
75	2418	2823	19.9	24.5	Alkaline	Mar 2024	96832982	China	duracell.com
71	2175	2771	17.8	24.7	Alkaline	Oct 2019	2618 1158	China	aldi.com.au
69	2155	2703	17.8	24.1	Alkaline	Oct 2018	5455	China	teks.com.au
67	2291	2394	18.6	19.7	Alkaline	Mar 2023	2197032	USA	energizerbatteries.com.au
67	2179	2484	18.0	21.4	Alkaline	2022	96252728	China	duracell.com
65	2171	2382	17.8	20.2	Alkaline	Mar 2023	2199443	Singapore	energizerbatteries.com.au
62	2093	2258	17.2	19.0	Alkaline	2020	2200015	Singapore	energizerbatteries.com.au
62	2064	2247	17.0	19.1	Alkaline	Dec 2018	6878674	Korea	coles.com.au
62	2072	2237	17.0	18.9	Alkaline	Mar 2018	SB-4245	China	mwave.com.au
60	2028	2206	16.6	18.6	Alkaline	Nov 2015	6506520	China	bigw.com.au
60	2018	2167	16.6	18.2	Alkaline	Oct 2018	ECOAA4EU	China	buyecogreen.com.au
60	2021	2172	16.6	18.2	Alkaline	Nov 2019	AM3-B4A	Indonesia	inkman.com.au
58	1951	2133	16.2	18.2	Alkaline	Nov 2018	S3181	China	dse.com.au
58	1978	2080	16.4	17.5	Alkaline	Jun 2018	4106 249 414	Germany	varta-consumer.com/en-au
56	1910	2001	15.7	16.7	Alkaline	Jan 2019	E91-4006	Indonesia	batteryworld.com.au
80	1316	1328	22.2	22.6	Lithium	Mar 2028	2198224	Singapore	energizerbatteries.com.au
72	1095	1284	21.3	26.5	Alkaline	Oct 2019	2618 1141	China	aldi.com.au
72	1090	1276	21.2	26.3	Alkaline	Apr 2019	7473	China	teks.com.au
68	1074	1153	20.9	23.1	Alkaline	Dec 2022	96832986	China	duracell.com
65	1022	1137	20.1	23.2	Alkaline	2022	96238604	China	duracell.com
63	1014	1078	19.8	21.5	Alkaline	Nov 2015	6506575	China	bigw.com.au
61	982	1016	19.0	19.9	Alkaline	2020	81623065-P86	China	evereadybatteries.com
55	889	933	17.5	18.6	Alkaline	Nov 2018	S3181	China	dse.com.au

WHAT TO BUY (AA BATTERIES)

93% Energizer Ultimate Lithium
84% Eveready Lithium
79% Varta Professional Lithium
75% Duracell Ultra
71% Activ Energy (Aldi)

Using the table
Score The overall score is made up of: performance with equal weighting for capacity at 1V and 0.7V. **Price** Recommended retail, as of October 2014. **Note** Scores can't be directly compared to previous tests.

WHAT TO BUY

(AAA BATTERIES) BEST OVERALL

80%
Energizer Ultimate Lithium (4 x AAA)

Delivering significantly higher capacity among the AAA models, this is also the most expensive. But if you need your gadget to perform at its best for longer, it's the best option we tested.

BEST ALKALINES

72%
Active Energy (Aldi) (4 x AAA)

72%
Winmax (4 x AAA)

The two cheapest batteries tested also deliver impressive performance, but you need to go to either an Aldi or a discount variety store to find them.

How we test

The batteries were tested in a rig where each of the batteries was discharged into a fixed load. The load was 10 Ohms for the AA batteries, and 24 Ohms for the AAA batteries. Four examples of each model were tested.

All about AAs

If you want a more affordable AA Lithium option, the **Eveready Lithium** battery may fit the bill. It doesn't deliver the capacity or overall life of the top-ranking Energizer Ultimate Lithium, but it's over a dollar cheaper per battery. The **Varta Professional Lithium** is one of the cheapest lithium battery options available, but its performance isn't that much better than the best alkaline tested. The **Energizer Advanced**, **Duracell Coppertop** and **Energizer Max** should satisfy your gadget-powering needs, but the **Activ Energy** and the **Winmax** both deliver impressive performance at a budget price. ■

IMAGE: THINKSTOCK

Nutshell

- Wash performance and cost depend on the program you choose.
- Six new washers tested, none make our recommended list.

Dirty laundry

Not all programs are equal, finds **Matthew Steen**

So you're thinking of buying a washing machine. It will more than likely be one of the most-used products in your household, churning through a load of laundry at least once – if not a few times – a week. If you check out the table on p 68, you'll see that the scores we give machines are based on:

- the program most often used by our members, and
- a partial load – a weight also determined by our members.

But what about the other programs? You'll find plenty of variations on your favourite program – some of which you may never use (like a delicates cycle in a bachelor pad). But if you're not careful, you may choose the wrong one and end up spending more than you need to.

For instance, we tested the Simpson 9.5kg machine on its labelled "cold wash" program, which you'd expect would be tweaked for the best result using cold water. But because it chooses the high water option automatically, it means over 230 litres of water are used in a single wash. That's an extra few dollars a year that you don't really need to spend, compared with a regular automatic sensor wash dialled down to cold, using roughly half that amount and giving a much better result.

You really do get a lot of benefit out of reading your manual. Usually it has the programs listed and what type of load they're intended for. Doing so will take only a few minutes of your time, but will save you money you don't need to spend.

WHAT TO BUY

CHOICE recommends front loaders that have a score of at least 80 per cent overall, and 80 per cent for dirt removal. For those who prefer top loaders, we recommend those that score at least 70 per cent overall and 70 per cent for dirt removal. We don't recommend any machines with less than 55 per cent in any score. There are other performers in the table that are good options. For full profiles of other machines from our table, see **choice.com.au/washers**

PREVIOUSLY RECOMMENDED

FRONT LOADER

82% LG WD14024D6 (8kg) (Sep 13) $1149
81% LG WD12021D6 (7kg) (Sep 13) $849
81% LG WD14130D6 (8.5kg) (Dec 13/Jan 14) $1409
80% Bosch WAP24160AU (7kg) (Sep 13) $1129

TOP LOADER

74% Fisher & Paykel WL1068P1 (10kg) (Jun 13) $1349

(Month and year in brackets refers to the *CHOICE* issue in which washer was first profiled)

		COSTS		PERFORMANCE			
		Price ($)	Running costs ($ / 10 years)	Overall score (%)	Dirt removal score (%)	Rinse performance score (%)	Gentleness score (%)
FRONT LOADERS	**LG** WD14024D6	1149	649	82	80	89	73
	LG WD12021D6	849	819	81	82	96	65
	LG WD14130D6	1409	656	81	80	86	70
	Miele W5873	2699	536	81	79	89	73
	Bosch WAP24160AU	1129	836	80	82	98	69
	Electrolux EWF12832	1059	556	80	79	86	72
	Electrolux EWF14742	1029	560	80	79	83	70
	Fisher & Paykel WH7560J1	1059	588	80	79	94	70
	LG WD14070SD6	2029	691	80	79	92	68
	• **Samsung** WW85H7410EW	1699	572	80	79	89	69
	Asko W6884	1899	952	79	80	98	67
	Fisher & Paykel WH8560J1	999	696	79	79	96	67
	Hoover VHD8144D	799	572	79	77	87	71
	Miele W1913	1799	503	79	76	88	72
	Miele W5741	2099	444	79	79	80	72
	Panasonic NA-148VG3	1149	447	79	80	85	72
	LG WD14022D6	949	704	78	78	92	62
	AEG L77480FL	1499	532	77	72	86	72
	Beko WMB81641LC	1029	631	77	77	87	68
	Bosch WAY32540AU	2349	443	77	78	71	70
	• **Samsung** WW75H5290EW	849	528	77	76	86	69
	Hoover DYN9166P	1399	464	76	73	79	72
	Simpson SWF85562	759	822	76	77	92	69
	Ariston AQ9L29U.1	1499	864	75	83	88	59
	Haier HWM80-1403D	729	419	73	72	62	70
TOP LOADERS	**Fisher & Paykel** WL1068PI	1349	856	74	73	95	64
	LG WT-R10856	1599	946	73	80	95	46
	Haier HWMP55-918	429	776	71	79	89	42
	Haier HWMP65-918	549	827	70	75	79	51
	Fisher & Paykel WL80T65CW2	1189	904	69	66	96	53
	Fisher & Paykel WA80T65FW1	1029	1225	68	67	98	67
	LG WT-H550	749	1001	68	68	96	71
	Haier HWMP95TL	899	1233	67	73	94	49
	• **Simpson** SWT6042	609	687	67	67	81	45
	LG WT-H6506	849	1095	66	70	97	52
	LG WT-H7506	949	995	66	69	95	50
	• **Simpson** SWT5542	544	668	66	64	86	45
	• **Simpson** SWT9542	969	1024	66	67	94	49
	Samsung WA75F5S6	949	1013	65	66	94	59
	Fisher & Paykel MW60	699	1100	64	60	96	56
	Samsung WA80F5G4	1099	1120	64	65	95	60
	• **Simpson** SWT8012	939	1208	62	58	96	63

					BRAND		FEATURES					SPECIFICATIONS				
Water efficiency score (%)	Spin efficiency score (%)	Water used (L, normal cycle)	Cycle time (min, normal wash)	Noise (dB)	Brand reliability (%)	Brand loyalty (%)	Woollens cycle (machine- / hand-washable)	Out-of-balance correction	Selectable spin speed	Auto-sensing water level	Extra rinse	Tap connection	Coldest wash temperature for normal wash (°C)*	Capacity (kg)	Claimed dimensions (cm, H x W x D)	Contact
87	81	44	121	62	84	89	✓/–	✓	✓	✓	✓	H & C	Cold	8	85 x 60 x 64	lg.com.au
76	77	64	131	57	84	89	✓/–	✓	✓	✓		H & C	Cold	7	85 x 60 x 55	lg.com.au
87	80	43	125	55	84	89	✓/–	✓	✓	✓	✓	H & C	Cold	8.5	85 x 60 x 64	lg.com.au
84	77	49	84	58	92	96	✓/✓	✓	✓	✓		H & C	Cold	8	85 x 60 x 62	miele.com.au
71	70	73	139	61	91	96	✓/✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	C only	Cold	7	85 x 60 x 60	bosch-home.com.au
87	72	44	107	64	86	88	✓/–	✓	✓	✓	✓	C only	Cold	8	85 x 60 x 67	electrolux.com.au
87	78	44	110	65	86	88	✓/✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	C only	Cold	7	85 x 60 x 59	electrolux.com.au
81	70	54	126	60	84	89	–/–	✓	✓	✓	✓	H & C	Cold	7.5	85 x 60 x 59	fp.com.au
78	77	59	109	56	84	89	✓/–	✓	✓	✓	✓	H & C	Cold	10	85 x 60 x 64	lg.com.au
85	77	46	125	58	82	94	✓/–	✓	✓	✓	✓	C only	Cold	8.5	85 x 60 x 60	samsung.com.au
60	80	92	137	65	85	91	✓/✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	H & C	Cold	7	85 x 60 x 59	asko.com.au
76	70	64	127	57	84	89	–/–	✓	✓	✓	✓	H & C	Cold	8.5	85 x 60 x 65	fp.com.au
85	74	47	68	69	na	na	✓/–	✓	✓	✓		C only	Cold	7	85 x 60 x 52	goodguys.com.au
85	72	48	81	64	92	96	✓/✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	C only	Cold	7	85 x 60 x 66	miele.com.au
89	73	39	83	61	92	96	✓/✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	C only	Cold	7.5	85 x 60 x 62	miele.com.au
87	60	44	73	64	na	na	✓/✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	C only	Cold	8	85 x 60 x 63	panasonic.com.au
79	77	59	114	62	84	89	✓/–		✓	✓		H & C	Cold	7.5	85 x 60 x 55	lg.com.au
84	77	48	71	62	na	na	✓/✓		✓	✓	✓	C only	Cold	8	85 x 61 x 64	aegaustralia.com.au
77	69	62	87	62	na	na	✓/–	✓	✓	✓		C only	Cold	8	84 x 60 x 59	beko.com.au
90	73	38	114	59	91	96	✓/✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	C only	Cold	8	85 x 60 x 59	bosch-home.com.au
85	63	47	107	57	82	94	✓/–	✓	✓	✓	✓	C only	Cold	7.5	85 x 60 x 60	samsung.com.au
87	74	43	66	66	na	na	✓/–	✓	✓	✓		C only	Cold	8	85 x 60 x 60	goodguys.com.au
82	59	52	115	63	83	84	–/–	✓	✓	✓		C only	Cold	5.5	85 x 60 x 56	simpson.com.au
79	35	57	275	63	na	na	✓/✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	C only	Cold	8.5	85 x 60 x 65	aristonbrand.com
94	73	31	110	63	na	na	✓/–	✓	✓	✓	✓	C only	Cold	8	85 x 60 x 60	haier.com.au
57	73	98	52	58	84	89	–/–	✓	✓	✓		H & C	Cold	10	106 x 69 x 70	fp.com.au
55	66	102	83	56	84	89	✓/–	✓	✓	✓	✓	H & C	Cold	10	116 x 69 x 76	lg.com.au
70	50	73	99	62	na	na	✓/–	✓		✓	✓	H & C	Cold	5.5	90 x 53 x 52	haierlife.com.au
69	58	75	103	58	na	na	✓/–	✓		✓	✓	H & C	Cold	6.5	96 x 56 x 55	haierlife.com.au
53	75	105	60	57	84	89	✓/–	✓	✓	✓		H & C	Cold	8	102 x 65 x 65	fp.com.au
27	72	152	49	63	84	89	✓/–	✓	✓	✓		H & C	Cold	8	102 x 65 x 65	fp.com.au
40	53	127	68	55	84	89	–/–	✓		✓	✓	H & C	Cold	5.5	94 x 54 x 54	lg.com.au
41	56	126	86	53	na	na	–/–					H & C	Cold	9.5	111 x 69 x 69	haier.com.au
73	58	68	69	59	83	84	✓/–	✓			✓	H & C	Cold	6	115 x 60 x 64	simpson.com.au
38	52	132	74	57	84	89	✓/–	✓		✓	✓	H & C	Cold	6.5	100 x 59 x 61	lg.com.au
46	54	117	71	56	84	89	✓/–	✓		✓	✓	H & C	Cold	7.5	100 x 59 x 61	lg.com.au
72	58	71	66	59	83	84	✓/–	✓			✓	H & C	Cold	5.5	115 x 60 x 64	simpson.com.au
45	67	119	98	59	83	84	✓/–	✓		✓	✓	H & C	Cold	9.5	120 x 70 x 73	simpson.com.au
40	48	128	58	52	82	94	–/–		✓	✓	✓	H & C	Cold	7.5	103 x 64 x 67	samsung.com.au
35	68	136	41	65	84	89	✓/–	✓	✓			H & C	Cold	6	102 x 56 x 56	fp.com.au
32	49	143	63	52	82	94	–/–		✓	✓	✓	H & C	Cold	8	110 x 61 x 68	samsung.com.au
25	69	155	67	58	83	84	✓/–	✓	✓	✓	✓	H & C	Cold	8	120 x 70 x 73	simpson.com.au

USING THE TABLE

Price Recommended or average retail, as of November 2014.

Scores The overall score is made up of dirt removal (40%), rinse performance (20%), gentleness (15%), water efficiency (15%) and spin efficiency (10%).

Cold wash penalty As most Australians now wash in cold water straight from the tap, we've applied a small penalty in our overall score to models that cannot do a proper cold wash (at about 20°C) on the normal cycle. While the higher wash temperature may slightly increase a machine's scores for dirt removal and rinse effectiveness, it also means it's using more energy than it would if it were able to do a true cold wash.

Dirt removal More accurate than the human eye, a spectrophotometer is used to measure this – differences of about 6% are visible.

Features See What to Look For, p 70, for details.

Tap connection Some machines need both hot and cold water to operate (H&C). Others connect to cold water only (C only) and may need a special connector or sealing cap for the hot water inlet. A machine with a heater can be particularly useful if you connect to cold only, as it still gives you the option of a warm or hot wash. But a dual-connection front-loader connected to solar hot water can be more efficient when doing warm or hot washes.

Dimensions are for the smallest box that fits around the machine, as stated by the manufacturer.

Running costs This is an estimate of how much it will cost for water and electricity over 10 years, if you wash the equivalent of one load every day using a normal cycle, based on 28c/kWh of electricity and $2/1000L for water. Some machines still draw power when the machine is connected to a power source but not in use, so switch off the machine at the power point when you're not using it. The running costs don't include the price of detergent, which is the biggest ongoing cost of running a washing machine.

Brand reliability and **Brand loyalty**, where we have statistics, they're taken straight from our Brand reliability survey, but do not add to the overall score. These scores refer to the brand only, not necessarily that particular model. Differences of 3% or more between brands are significant.

TABLE NOTES

• Newly tested.
* Cold = cold tap water (20°C).
na Not applicable.

HOW WE TEST

Our lab testers subject all washing machines to the same round of rigorous tests. First, using a normal cold-water wash cycle, they test each machine to see how it shifts tough stains from specially prepared cloths, which have been attached to a standard wash-set of linen.

After the wash cycle has finished, the testers use a special machine (spectrophotometer) to examine every cloth to see how much light is reflected from each stain, which allows them to calculate how much dirt has been removed. This machine is more sensitive than the human eye; differences of six per cent or more in the dirt removal scores are visible.

As well as dirt removal and rinse performance, we score machines on:

- gentleness,
- spin efficiency
- water efficiency.

Since most Australians wash in cold water, we apply a small penalty in our overall score to models that can't do a proper cold wash (about 20°C) on their "normal" cycle.

What to look for

Woollens cycle (machine- or hand-washable) programs relate to the instructions on the garment itself, advising whether it's suitable for machine-washing or for hand-wash only. Washers with a tick for hand-wash say this program is gentle enough for hand-wash-only items.

Out-of-balance correction detects and redistributes an out-of-balance load, either by spinning slowly before the full spin cycle or taking in more water, as most top loaders do. If you're concerned about high water usage, opt for a machine without this feature or buy a front loader, which is less likely to go out of balance than a top loader.

Selectable spin speed allows you to change the spin speed on some programs. A higher spin speed will result in drier clothes at the end of the cycle, while a lower speed is for delicates or fabrics that crease easily.

Auto-sensing water level optimises the amount of water, energy and time by automatically adjusting the water level according to the load and/or fabric type. Some machines will also adjust the washing action.

Extra rinse can be useful for people who are sensitive to detergents, because it adds an extra rinse stage to the washing program using just clean water to get rid of excess detergent.

Tap connection If you only have a cold water tap in your laundry, choosing a front loader means you can still wash in warm or hot water when needed, as the machine will heat the water. If you want to take advantage of less expensive hot-water systems, such as solar, look for a machine connected to hot and cold water. Be aware, however, that most front loaders with hot and cold water connections only draw hot water when the wash temperature is set to 60°C.

Favourite program lets you program your preferred wash option for future use at the touch of a button, saving you time in the long run. ■

A cut above

For keeping a large lawn in shape, a petrol lawnmower is hard to beat says Chris Barnes

Nutshell

- 17 four-stroke lawnmowers tested, including 10 mulcher and 7 catcher-only models.
- For cutting long grass and for mulching, petrol mowers generally outperform electric and battery-powered models.

Decreasing lawn sizes, more apartments and the availability of mowing services means that many people have no need for a mower these days. But the weekend hum of lawnmowers is still a common sound in most suburbs and towns. And for a large lawn, or where there's long grass to tackle, a petrol lawnmower is still the preferred choice for most people.

Almost all petrol mowers sold now are four-stroke models, and that's the type we've tested. Their main advantage for most users is that they use straight unleaded petrol (the same fuel you put in your car), unlike two-stroke models that run on a blend of petrol and two-stroke oil. They are also generally considered to be a bit quieter and longer-lasting. Some people nevertheless prefer two-stroke mowers; they can be smaller and lighter, and are often better on steep slopes. However, two-stroke mowers emit a lot more pollution, therefore CHOICE doesn't recommend them.

For a small or medium-sized lawn, a battery-powered or electric model is a good alternative, though they tend not to cope as well as petrol models with long grass. Battery models can also mulch grass well, though again, we find that petrol models have the advantage here. For recommended battery and electric lawnmowers, see *CHOICE*, Nov 13.

Mulch or catch?

Mulching mowers chop the grass finely and force the clippings back down between the blades of grass. Catcher-only lawnmowers produce grass clippings that are longer and need to be removed from the lawn to avoid suffocating it.

The fine clippings from a mulching lawnmower also reduce your lawn's need for water and fertiliser by slowing down evaporation – an environmentally friendly and cost-saving option. Mulcher mode tends to work best when the lawn is mowed regularly, trimming a small amount of grass each time – this allows for fine mulching. If the lawn is too long, it can be better to do the first mow in catcher mode to remove the long grass before returning to regular mulching runs.

IMAGE: THINKSTOCK

		PERFORMANCE					SPECIFICATIONS			
	Price ($)	Overall score (%)	Cutting score – catcher (%)	Cutting score – mulcher (%)	Ease of use score (%)	Noise at 7.5 m / user's position (dB)	Self-propelled	Motor	Deck	Starter toggle location
CATCHER & MULCHER										
• **Toro** Personal Pace Recycler 22" 20332C	848	87	98	100	75	67/85	✓	B&S	Steel	Handle
Makita PLM4614P	398	86	95	100	74	67/82		B&S	Steel	Handle
AL-KO Silver Premium 470BRV	599	85	98	100	71	70/82	✓	B&S	Steel	Motor
• **Greenfield** Kohler XT8	649	85	100	100	69	74/91		Kohler	Alloy	Handle
Victa Corvette 650 GMS486	659	85	98	100	71	74/86		B&S	Alloy	Motor
• **Victa** Easy Walker 19" VMD486	699	85	98	100	70	70/83	✓	B&S	Steel	Handle
Rover Regal SP Mulch'n'Catch 12A-E1LB333	639	84	92	95	74	72/87	✓	Rover	Alloy	Handle
Victa Commando CMS485	699	84	98	100	68	71/84		Honda	Steel	Motor
Victa Mustang MCA485	749	84	98	100	68	76/91		Honda	Alloy	Motor
AL-KO Silver 470B	499	83	98	100	67	70/83		B&S	Steel	Handle
• **Masport** S19 MSV Genius 4 'n 1 AL - 578916	849	83	100	100	66	74/89		B&S	Alloy	Handle
SupaSwift Lawn Range Blue	439	83	95	100	68	70/83		Kohler	Steel	Handle
Honda HRU197M1 Bull	979	81	98	100	62	70/82		Honda	Alloy	Handle
Honda HRU19M1 Buffalo Buck	839	80	98	100	61	73/85		Honda	Alloy	Handle
• **Masport** S18 470ST 2n'1 578912	429	80	95	88	69	68/85		B&S	Steel	Handle
Parklander PCM4050	349	80	92	95	66	74/87		B&S	Steel	Handle
• **TPE** TN008B	849	79	98	100	59	72/88		Honda	Alloy	Motor
Rover Challenger Mulch'n'Catch 11A-H1LE333	479	76	92	95	58	75/88		Rover	Steel	Handle
• **Victa** Super Mulcher 18" Mulch or Catch VMS467	479	75	92	68	70	68/85		B&S	Steel	Handle
• **SupaSwift** 777XMC Blue	599	72	98	65	63	71/85		Honda	Steel	Motor
Honda HRU196M1 Buffalo Classic	1039	70	98	100	40	71/83		Honda	Alloy	Handle
• **Husqvarna** LC19A	699	70	98	60	61	67/83		B&S	Alloy	Handle
• **Makita** PLM5116P	603	70	98	55	63	71/86		B&S	Alloy	Handle
CATCHER ONLY										
• **909** Key Start ES18	299	86	95	na	76	69/83		909	Steel	Handle (key)
• **Troy-Bilt** Easy Start Xtra 11A-HOOK363	429	83	98	na	68	69/84		B&S	Steel	Handle
• **Rover** Challenger Xtra/11A-H0LB333	429	82	98	na	65	70/86		Rover	Steel	Handle
• **Victa** Super Catcher 18" Cut and Catch VCS469	399	82	92	na	71	67/85		B&S	Steel	Handle
• **AL-KO** Classic 4.24P-S	269	81	98	na	63	67/81		AL-KO	Steel	Handle
Honda HRU19K1 Buck	799	81	98	na	64	70/84		Honda	Alloy	Handle
• **Honda** HRU197K1 Buffalo Bull	939	80	98	na	61	70/83		Honda	Alloy	Handle
• **Sanli** LazerCut LCS400	219	76	92	na	59	69/87		Sanli	Steel	Motor

USING THE TABLE Price Recommended or average retail, as of Aug 2014. **Scores** *Catcher and mulcher* The overall score is made up of cutting score – catcher (25%), cutting score score is made up of cutting score – catcher (50%) and ease of use (50%). **TABLE NOTES** • Newly tested model. na Not applicable. **B&S** Briggs & Stratton. All models are four-stroke and

Number of cutting positions	Cutting height range (mm, measured)	Width of cut (cm, measured)	Closeness of cut to a vertical edge (mm, front / right / left)	Weight (kg)	Contact
9	25-95	55	170/30/18	34	toro.com.au
5	30-75	46	125/40/20	27	makita.com.au
7	30-70	46	135/40/18	37	alko.com.au
10	10-62	48	120/12/5	31	greenfield.com.au
10	15-70	48	115/18/18	28	victa.com.au
10	12-70	48	110/20/18	30	victa.com.au
12	13-60	50	140/20/20	34	rovermowers.com.au
10	12-65	48	115/18/18	28	victa.com.au
10	15-70	48	115/18/18	28	victa.com.au
7	30-70	46	130/45/20	29	alko.com.au
11	8-75	48	130/18/15	32	masport.com.au
10	17-58	45	110/18/18	30	allpower.com.au
11	15-70	47	140/18/18	34	hondampe.com.au
11	12-70	47	135/15/15	33	hondampe.com.au
10	12-72	46	110/40/15	24	masport.com.au
10	15-85	45	115/35/25	26	parklands.net
10	15-85	48	120/18/15	34	tpeaustralia.com.au
10	20-70	50	150/18/18	32	rovermowers.com.au
13	10-65	45	135/40/15	24	victa.com.au
10	15-65	45	115/18/15	28	allpower.com.au
11	12-70	47	135/15/15	43	hondampe.com.au
10	15-70	47	130/35/25	33	husqvarna.com.au
5	15-55	51	135/18/8	33	makita.com.au
8	18-70	46	95/32/30	31	masters.com.au
10	10-75	45	150/20/20	27	mtdproducts.com.au
10	10-72	45	150/20/20	31	rovermowers.com.au
13	15-65	45	125/35/15	23	victa.com.au
8	18-70	42	115/55/45	27	alko.com.au
11	15-70	47	140/18/18	33	hondampe.com.au
11	13-70	47	140/15/15	34	hondampe.com.au
10	18-70	42	112/35/20	28	sanli.com.au

– mulcher (25%) and ease of use (50%). *Catcher only* The overall use unleaded petrol.

WHAT TO BUY

We recommend models that score 85 per cent or above overall and at least 70 per cent for ease of use. For full profiles of all the models tested, log on to **choice.com.au/lawnmower.**

CATCHER AND MULCHER

87%
Toro Personal Pace Recycler 22" 20332C

Good points

- Blade control lever – engine stops almost instantly when the bar is released
- Has a wash nozzle for easy cleaning underneath the housing
- Least amount of handle vibration in this test
- Self-propelled drive with one speed
- No controls, as the engine always runs at maximum speed
- Starter cord is fairly easy to pull.
- Very easy to convert from catcher to mulcher with the built-in lever/flap

Bad points

- Some may find the handle too low
- The wheels have to be height-adjusted individually and the adjusters are fairly hard to move against the spring
- Catcher handle is thin and uncomfortable when carrying/emptying. Catcher lets small grass clippings and dust through the holes on both sides and the back

85%
Victa Easy Walker 19" VMD486

Good points

- Has a wash nozzle for easy cleaning underneath the housing
- Self-propelled drive with one speed
- Very good controls
- Easy to convert from catcher to mulching mode

Bad points

- Holding the self-propelled lever becomes uncomfortable on the hands with extended mowing, and it can also pinch the palm of the hand. The bar doesn't blend in with the handle
- Cutting height requires a fair amount of effort to adjust
- Difficult to restart the engine again when it's hot
- The catcher flap is not particularly convenient to open, as it doesn't lift up high enough

WHAT TO BUY (cont'd)

CATCHER ONLY

86%
909 Key Start ES18

Good points
- Quick-release folding handle
- Key-start motor
- Very comfortable upturned handle with rubber grip and very good height adjustment
- Very good controls
- The cutting height lever is easy to use

Bad points
- A little tiring to push and manoeuvre
- Catcher lets small grass clippings and dust through the holes on both sides. The catcher handle can also come out while shaking the full catcher to empty it

PREVIOUSLY RECOMMENDED

86% Makita PLM4614P (Nov 12)	$398
85% AL-KO Silver Premium 470BRV (Nov 11)	$599
85% Victa Corvette 650 GMS486 (Nov 11)	$659

(These models are all catcher and mulcher; no previously recommended catcher-only models are still available.)

About the rest

The **Greenfield** and **Masport** mowers are very good overall, but aren't as easy to use as the recommended models. The others are all excellent at cutting grass, but the **Victa Super Mulcher, Supaswift 777XMC Blue, Husqvarna** and **Makita PLM5116P** are only OK at mulching; when used on medium-length grass, they tend to leave a trail of un-mulched grass behind. The **Victa Super Mulcher** is generally easy to use but the rest are just OK. Of the other newly tested catcher models, all are excellent at cutting grass. The **Victa Super Catcher** is generally easy to use – the rest are just OK.

What to look for

Handle should be comfortable to hold and height-adjustable. Turned-up handles are easier on your wrists and give you better control over the mower.
The **engine control lever** should be on the handlebar and easy to operate.
The **starter cord** should be easy to pull and is generally easier to operate when it's on the engine, but a cord mounted half-way up the handle is good if you can't easily bend over.
Cutting positions Look for a large number spread over a useful range of cutting heights. Make sure the cutting height is easily adjustable.
The mulching adapter or **plug** should be easy to fit and remove (if the mower has one).
The catcher should ideally have two handles – one on top for carrying, and one on the back for easy emptying.
Manoeuvrability The mower should be easy to push and move in all conditions. Big wheels improve handling on rough ground and a lightweight model is easier to push and turn.
Cleaning A wash port or nozzle on top of the housing makes it easy to clean underneath the mower, including the blades.
Maintenance Can you easily change the oil, air filter and spark plugs? ■

Log on to **choice.com.au/choiceextra** (see below right) for a full index from 2007 onwards. Bold type indicates a product test, member survey or user trial report. Normal type indicates a CHOICE research report. *Indicates an update, addition or correction.

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HARD WORD

Thanks this month go to eagle-eyed members Meredith Lamb, Neil Sanders, Michel Gompes and Tess Rielly. If you have any more examples you'd like to share with other CHOICE members, send them with your full name to The Hard Word, 57 Carrington Road, Marrickville, NSW 2204. Please don't email us your entries – we need the unmarked originals.

Compiled by Siobahn Donohoe

IT'S IN THE JEANS

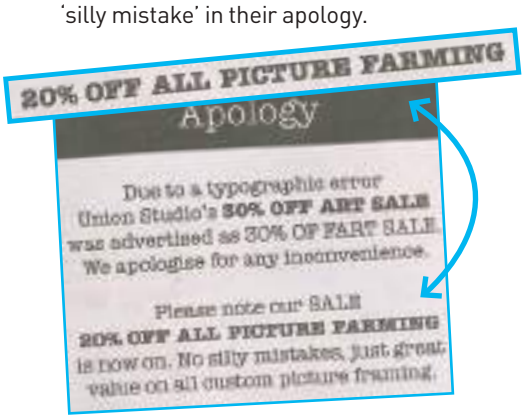
Neil Sanders is concerned about Rivers' offer of gusty jeans. "Does this mean they come pre-filled with wind?" he muses.

MAKING A MEAL OF IT

There's very little substance behind the pic on this packet of a hearty Spaghetti Bolognese. If you have to add minced beef, chopped tomatoes, mushrooms and the spaghetti, why not just start from scratch?

Clearing the air

We're glad this art studio took the opportunity to set us straight. It's just unfortunate that there's a second 'silly mistake' in their apology.


20% OFF ALL PICTURE FARMING
Apology
Due to a typographic error Union Studio's 50% OFF ART SALE was advertised as 30% OF FART SALE. We apologise for any inconvenience.
Please note our SALE 20% OFF ALL PICTURE FARMING is now on. No silly mistakes, just great value on all custom picture framing.

Coles Australian Lamb Lion Chops

A FINE LION

Has Coles discovered a new breed of extremely docile supercat? We think someone should be feeling a bit sheepish about this mistake, spotted by eight-year-old Tess Rielly.